

NEW YORK TIMES #1 BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



RICK RIORDAN'S  
DEMIGODS  
OF OLYMPUS



AN INTERACTIVE  
ADVENTURE





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Disney • HYPERION  
Los Angeles • New York

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ISBN 978-1-4847-5737-6

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Your quest begins now!

Use your demigod skills to help Zane Carver in his battle to survive. The choices you make will impact the story at every turn. As he is pitted against zombies, ghosts, and demons, you'll help Zane navigate through this adventure and learn who his godly parent is.

Be sure to read the prompts. They indicate that you have a decision to make.

And remember, your selections will have consequences. Choose wisely....

## My Two-Headed Guidance Counselor

Ugh. Not again.

“Pop quiz!” Mr. Scheer, our English teacher, grinned like this was fantastic news. “All books and notebooks away! Take out a pen or pencil. Let’s see what you remember from our Greek mythology unit!”

We called Mr. Scheer “the Professor” because he used to teach college. He also used to be a hippie, but the only remaining evidence of his wilder days were his too-long brown hair and the acoustic guitar he always kept nearby, just in case a folk song could illuminate some teaching concept.

As soon as the quiz was distributed, I flipped straight to the end for the one thing I knew I could answer: the extra credit question. Papers rustled as other students did the same. Although he was a little intense with his expectations, the Professor wasn’t entirely heartless. He always lobbed us an easy bonus question. This time it was:

*My favorite Greek god is \_\_\_\_\_.*

Just as I made my selection, the intercom crackled. “Mr. Scheer? It’s Ms. Lane from the front office.”

All the students looked up. Across the aisle, my best friend Sam shot me a nervous glance. A message from the front office almost always meant that somebody was in trouble, and often that somebody was me.

*Please not this time, I thought. For once, not me.*

“Good morning, Ms. Lane,” said Mr. Scheer. “Who would the principal like to see today?”

“You know who,” Ms. Lane sing-songed.

My face flushed as *oooooh*’s circulated around the room.

I’m always getting into trouble, usually over crazy stuff. Take last week. My biology class went on a behind-the-scenes tour at the local aquarium, and while my friends and I were on the roof, checking out the sea otter tanks, this seventeen-year-old sea otter named Lola took one look at me and torpedoed up and out of the water.

For the record, sea otters are NOT all fuzzy and friendly. Marilyn, the aquarium lady, had just finished telling us about their sharp little teeth, so it wasn't like any of us was going to try to catch Lola. I was afraid she might attack me, but instead she almost seemed *afraid* of me. She hopped and flopped her way over to the next tank—which happened to house a kelp forest and a bunch of sharks—and *SPLOOSH*, disappeared straight inside.

The entire class circled the perimeter of the kelp forest while a diver suited up to fetch Lola.

“Don't worry,” said Marilyn, sounding pretty worried. “The sharks were just fed this morning, so Lola should be okay. I think.”

I decided to trust Marilyn, because she looked like a librarian with her pulled-back hair and black eyeglasses, which were attached to one of those cord thingies so she would never lose them.

We were shepherded back to school right away, but thankfully we heard later that Lola had been recovered safely. The otter had calmed down as soon as I left and she allowed the divers to return her to her otter-mates. Nobody blamed me for the incident, but I knew the truth. Something about *me* had freaked out that otter so much that she felt safer in a tank full of sharks.

That's just one example, but if I'm entirely honest with you, I've experienced weird incidents like that my whole life. Something inexplicable happens, and then I just seem to make it worse by doing the exact wrong thing. When I was in kindergarten, my first report cards said things like “accident-prone” and “always seems to find trouble,” but over time, the timbre shifted to more accusatory, as if everything was my fault. Teachers usually say I'm too smart for my own good.

Anyway, as I made my way toward the principal's office, I wondered what I had done this time. The corridors were surprisingly quiet. I ran my hand along the orange lockers, then reached down to the keychain hanging out of my front pocket. It was an old, heavy silver coin with a gigantic tree etched on one side, and a face engraved on the other. The face was worn away so badly I couldn't even tell if it was supposed to be a man or a woman. My folks had given me the coin for my twelfth birthday. I remember being pretty underwhelmed (I wanted an iPad), but they made a big deal out of it being a family heirloom that was supposed to bring me good luck, so I let my dad drill a hole in it and stick it on my

key ring. Now I didn't feel whole without the familiar weight in my pocket.

At the end of the hallway, I suddenly stopped. The lockers here were a different color...dark red instead of orange. When had that happened? I looked back the way I'd come. The entire row was now the color of blood. I was *sure* they'd been orange a moment before.

A shiver went down my spine. I must have been mistaken.

As I was pondering that, I caught a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye: something fast and yellow—like some sort of animal—streaking across the opposite end of the hallway. By the time I tried to focus on it—cue the scary music—it had vanished.

"Hello?" I called out. "Is anyone there?"

No response.

A strange smell hung in the air—metallic and faintly acrid, like someone had left open a jar of pickles.

My imagination must be acting up, I figured. Or maybe I'd had too much pizza at lunch. That cafeteria food could definitely cause hallucinations. Slightly spooked, I hurried to Principal Moore's office and pushed my way through the glass doors, where Ms. Lane was waiting for me.

As far as school staff went, Ms. Lane was pretty cool. She always wore bright red lipstick and big gold hoop earrings, even though she was sixty years old. Her big, warm laugh and massive smile always put kids at ease. She actually seemed to care about what was going on in our lives.

"There you are!" she said to me. "What took you so long?" She gave me a sly smile. "Did you run into someone special on the way here?"

"Ms. Lane!" I protested.

"Honey, if I can give you one piece of advice on dating, here's what I learned the hard way: Marry the first time for money, and the second time for love. But don't tell your parents I said that."

I shuffled my sneakers on the gray carpet. "Uh, thanks for the advice." I didn't want to be rude, but I've never really had much interest in dating.

The intercom buzzed on Ms. Lane's desk. "Has our guest arrived?" asked an unfamiliar female voice.

"Yes, Ms. Roche," said Ms. Lane. "We were just chatting."

"Great, I'll be right out," the voice replied.

"Ms. Roche?" I asked. "I thought Principal Moore wanted to see me. Who's Ms. Roche?"



Ms. Lane swiveled her chair to face me. “Oh, she’s filling in as guidance counselor since Mr. Zinck is out sick. Don’t worry, she’s a peach. You’ll chat with Ms. Roche first and Principal Moore will join you when he’s available.”

Great, a guidance counselor AND the principal. How much trouble was I in, exactly? I couldn’t ignore the feeling in the pit of my stomach that I was about to face a firing squad.

And what kind of name was Ms. Roche? I pictured a woman with six legs, brown insect wings, and long, creepy antennae.

Instead, a young, pretty lady sashayed into the room. Her blond hair shimmered in the light, which was odd, since the dim fluorescents in the office usually made everyone look gray and ill. “Hi there! I’m Ms. Roche!”

I was caught a little off-guard. “Uh, hi...”

“Follow me. We’ll be using Mr. Zinck’s office.”

The guidance office looked the same as always: a crystal candy bowl on the desk, a mounted antelope head against the far wall, and the requisite fire extinguisher in the corner.

“Please sit down.” Ms. Roche’s tone was calm and warm. “So you’re probably wondering why we called you down. We noticed you were involved in an incident on Monday...”

Oh man, the weirdness in the cafeteria. I had totally forgotten about that.

“Right,” I said. “Look, I don’t know how that tray of enchiladas exploded. I was just standing there—”

“It’s fine,” she assured me. “Principal Moore simply wanted me to find out what happened. But since I’m new here, I thought we could start off with some general questions, get to know each other a bit. Okay?”

She seemed so nice and understanding, my shoulders began to relax. “Yeah, sounds good to me.”

“Great. First question.” She picked up her pen and opened a red folder on her desk. “What’s your favorite class?”

“Math.”

“Interesting,” said Ms. Roche. She raised her eyebrow, and something about her expression suddenly didn’t seem so friendly...more like *eager*. For reasons I couldn’t quite understand, I started thinking about those blood-red lockers in the hallway, that strange acrid smell, and the flash of movement I’d seen out of the corner of my eye.

“Um,” I said nervously, “so you normally work at another school in the district?”

I was hoping to make this ‘getting to know you’ thing more of a two-way street, but Ms. Roche just smiled.

“Let’s concentrate on you, shall we? Next question. In general, would you describe yourself as happy or discontented?”

“Well, I really think it depends on the day.”

Ms. Roche smirked, like she’d been expecting that answer. “Next question—”

“Um, can I ask you something first?”

“No,” she replied breezily. “So next question: Any phobias?”

I frowned. This was definitely getting weird. I’d taken those *What Color Is Your Parachute?* quizzes before, but this one seemed strange even for a guidance counselor to administer.

“Um, rats totally freak me out. We had them in our walls when I was a kid, and I used to stay up all night listening to them.”

Ms. Roche nodded sagely. “Perfect. Now let’s talk about Monday’s incident in the cafeteria. We’ve heard from multiple people that you were the person sitting closest to the scene. Can you tell me what happened?”

I started tapping my feet, the way I always do when I get nervous. I wasn’t quite sure why, but I wanted to get out of this office. “Well, I was just eating my lunch. I heard a commotion and saw Carter McKeown—he’s this mean red-headed guy—stealing Kevin Small’s lunch.”

“Uh huh,” replied Ms. Roche, scribbling down some notes. “What happened next?”

“Well, I used to ride the bus with Carter in elementary school, so I thought maybe I could talk him down before things escalated. I was just getting up, but before I could do anything...I don’t know what happened. The lunch tray just, like, exploded. Carter got steaming enchilada in his eyes and all over his face, and he just took off screaming. People thought I’d done something to make that happen. But I didn’t. Honest.”

“Hmm.” Ms. Roche flipped to another page in the red folder. She pursed her lips in concern. “But that’s not the first *odd* incident in your file, is it? According to this, you prank-called the police last week about an earthquake?”

“It wasn’t a prank!” I crossed my arms. “I was in the chemistry lab by myself. I was cleaning up because I got in trouble for...well, that doesn’t matter. The point is, I felt a tremor. I swear—the beakers were shaking, the Bunsen burners were flaring up...I thought the roof was going to cave in! I tried to open the door, but it got locked somehow. I yelled for help, but I guess no one could hear me, so...”

Ms. Roche frowned. “The incident report says that no one else felt anything.”

“The quake was real,” I insisted. “I didn’t know what else to do, so I grabbed Lexi’s phone and dialed 9-1-1.”

Ms. Roche’s eyes gleamed with a strange light. “Lexi is a friend of yours? Why did you make the call from your friend’s phone and not your own?”

“I—I don’t have a phone. My folks...they won’t let me have one. Anyway, Lexi accidentally left her cell phone at my house the day before and I still had it, so I used it, because...” I faltered. I really didn’t like the way Ms. Roche was staring at me, like she was enjoying my discomfort. “Why do you care if I have a cell phone?” I asked. “And what does it have to do with the cafeteria incident?”

“Oh, it all ties together, my dear. Your lack of a phone explains a great deal—such as why we didn’t detect your presence sooner.”

My mouth went dry. “Detect...my presence?”

The second hand on the wall clock ticked. I started fingering my lucky coin again. The details of the office came into sharper focus. On the table behind Ms. Roche was a stack of red folders like the one she was using for my notes. The folder on top of mine had an intricate gold seal and the word CONFIDENTIAL stamped across it.

“Wh-what does a red folder mean?” I stammered. “And why do I have one?”

“Oh, my dear...” Ms. Roche rose. “Because you’re very special.”

For the first time, I realized that her hair was the same color as that flash of movement I’d seen in the hallway—but that couldn’t have been Ms. Roche. No human could have moved that fast, and that thing in the hall had seemed...more like a wild animal somehow.

My pulse began to race. “I want to see the principal now. I was supposed to see Mr. Moore.”

Ms. Roche’s laughter was deep and throaty. “I’m afraid that isn’t possible. Mr. Moore was in my way, just like Mr. Zinck. They would have interfered with our conversation, so I took care of them.”

“Took care of...” My heart climbed up my throat. “You don’t mean...You couldn’t have—”

Ms. Roche exhaled, and a chillingly familiar metallic scent wafted through the room. Her fingernails grew, transforming into claws.

“What the—” I bolted for the door, but Ms. Roche was fast. She sprang across the office in a blur of yellow and blocked my path.

“Leaving so soon?” Ms. Roche growled. “We’re just getting down to business.”

Then the most insane thing happened. Her jaw opened wide. Her head peeled back like a hoodie and out of her mouth grew a *new* head: a feline snout, black lips and white fangs, and large, hungry gold eyes. Her yellow dress changed into sleek fur. Ms. Roche became a fully formed lioness, standing upright on her haunches, ready to tear me to pieces with those gleaming claws.

“I’m so glad you used your friend’s cell phone,” she purred. Her voice was the only thing that hadn’t changed. “Otherwise we might not have found you in time.”

I tried to scream for help. My voice wouldn’t work. Besides, this *creature* had already gotten rid of the principal and the counselor. If nice old Ms. Lane came running in, trying to help me, I’d only get her killed. I backed up, nearly falling over my chair.

“We who?” I squeaked. “In time for what?”

“No matter.” Her tail flicked back and forth. The crazed look in her eyes made my knees turn to jelly. “I’ll make this easy for you. Your death will be quick.”

She bared her fangs.

I clenched my left hand, suddenly aware I was gripping my lucky coin. Why hadn’t my parents given me a pocketknife? Or a mini-canister of lion spray? Can you even *buy* lion spray? Or do you just buy bear spray and hope for the best?

My thoughts were interrupted as Ms. Roche lunged at me, claws extended and fangs exposed. I shouted, instinctively dropping to the ground and rolling to my right.

My left fist, still clenched tightly, suddenly felt like it was gripping hot lava. I opened my hand to drop the coin, but liquid metal spilled out instead.

Ms. Roche saw it and scrambled back against the far wall. “No!” she said. “How...?”

We both watched as the liquid metal ate through the floor, then through the concrete below, and then through the dirt. I heard a loud rumbling, and Ms. Roche howled as an oak tree erupted through the floor. Its branches lifted her up, wrapped themselves around her waist, and tore at her as they writhed and grew. Ms. Roche seemed to disintegrate into smoke and dust, and then the tree broke through the ceiling, still rising, reaching for the sun.

The fire alarm and sprinkler systems went off, dousing me with cold water.

A loud thud made me jump out of my skin. I turned as the office door splintered and blasted inward like it had been hit with a battering ram. Standing in the doorway was my best friend, Sam, his eyes wide with alarm, his curly blond hair disheveled. His backpack was slung over one shoulder. But something about his appearance was wrong. His jeans...he was wearing *fur* jeans. No. Wait. Those weren't jeans. They were *actual* fur. And his feet...his feet were *hooves*.

I wanted to curl into a ball and hide under the shattered counselor's desk. I wanted to sob and laugh at the same time. Obviously, I was losing my mind. None of this could be happening.

"Thank the gods you're safe!" Sam shouted over the sound of the fire alarms. "We have to leave *now*!"

"Wh-what—how—?" I pointed feebly at his cloven hooves.

Sam rolled his eyes. "No time to talk! More monsters will be coming. Just grab your file and follow me!"

*My file.* I spotted the red folder nestled nicely in one of the tree branches. With the sprinklers going, it would soon be ruined.

*You're very special*, Ms. Roche had said. What was in that file? Why had that lion/counselor/monster lady been so intent on killing me?

I snatched up the folder. Sam leaped through the hole in the office wall and ran toward the woods, where he and I had spent so many summers hiding out and playing when we were kids.

Could I trust Sam? How could I not? Even if he had suddenly grown furry legs and hooves, he was my best friend. Besides, I didn't see much choice. With my luck, I would probably get blamed for destroying the office and disintegrating the guidance counselor...And I couldn't forget what Sam had said: *More monsters will be coming*.

I jumped through the broken wall and followed him.

By the time we reached our favorite clearing in the woods, I was gasping for breath. Fire alarms and emergency vehicle sirens howled behind us in the distance. I was still dripping wet from the sprinklers, and my legs were shaking from the adrenaline rush.

I wiped my eyes. I hoped Sam would look normal again, but nope. He was still rocking the goat fur and the hooves.

"Sam Greenwood," I said. "Why are you a sheep?"

He made that bleating sound like he always did when he was annoyed. "I'm half-*goat*. Not half-sheep. I'm a satyr. But that's not important right now."

“Not important? How is my best friend turning into a livestock animal *not important?*”

“Look, you’re in danger. I was afraid this might happen when you told me you had used Lexi’s cell phone.”

“Why is everyone so obsessed about me using a stupid cell phone?”

“Because when a demigod uses one, the signal attracts monsters,” Sam said, like this was obvious information. “When you were summoned to the office, I should’ve realized they’d zeroed in on you.”

“Demigod,” I said, my head spinning. “Monster. I-I don’t—”

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” he said. “But we have to get you someplace safe. That file you’re carrying may have some answers. We’ll study it later.”

“We’ll study it *now*,” I insisted.

I opened the red folder. Some of the ink had bled, making parts of the report hard to read. I suspected I might have lost some pages while running from the school to the woods, but the first page was clear enough. It had a grainy surveillance-style photo of me above a bunch of personal information: home address, birthdate, family details.

I flipped to the next page and saw an official-looking form with Zane Carver at the top, and the following words:

DEMIGOD STATUS:  
CONFIRMED

As I looked at the page, I tried to steady my breathing. “Sam, what does this all mean? What is going on? How—”

From somewhere in the woods, an angry howl pierced the air—like a large predator cat on the hunt.

“There’s no time, Zane,” Sam said urgently. “I know you have a lot of questions, but we’re not safe here! Come on!”

## The Library of Deadly Weapons

“Sam,” I wheezed. “I have to stop.”

After running through the woods for over a mile, we were nearing the Broken Fork River, a whitewater rapid about eight feet across.

So far, no crazy lion ladies had attacked us, but if I kept running I wouldn’t have to worry about that, because I would die of a heart attack.

Sam had always been faster than me, but now that he had goat hooves, he was even more nimble in the forest.

*Goat hooves.*

I still couldn’t believe it. I wanted to think that the incident back at school had been a crazy pizza-induced hallucination, but no...my best friend was clopping around right in front of me, shedding tufts of goat fur and twitching his little tail.

Did he have *horns*? Oh, man. Maybe that’s why he kept his hair so long and shaggy. He could totally hide goat horns under that blond thicket of his.

“We’ll rest a second,” Sam said, scanning the woods behind us. “But *only* a second. We’re not—”

“We’re not safe,” I said. “Yeah. I got that the first twelve times you told me. But I want explanations. How are you a goat man?”

“Satyr.”

“Whatever! Why was Ms. Roche a monster? What is a demigod? And what does it have to do with me?”

Sam raised his hands in surrender. “I’ll try to give you the quick version. You know all that stuff we’ve been learning in Mr. Scheer’s class—the Greek myths, gods, monsters? It’s all true.”

My throat felt like it was full of cotton. “When you say *true*...”

“I mean the gods are still around, Zane,” Sam said. “The myths are real. Those stories about how the gods mingle with humans and occasionally have kids—”

“—who are half-god, half-human. Like Hercules.”

Sam frowned. “Yeah, well, Hercules isn’t my personal favorite, but that’s the general idea. Demigods exist in the modern world, too. So do monsters. Creatures like Ms. Roche...they’re always looking for

demigods, hoping to kill them before they get old enough and strong enough to be a threat. Satyrs like me...our job is to *protect* demigods. We get close to the young heroes, let them enjoy a normal life for as long as possible, then, when the monsters finally close in, we get the demigods out of danger.”

“Wait...” I felt like I was being covered in heavy sap; if I let Sam’s words settle over me, if I tried to believe them, I would be trapped forever like a bug in amber. “So you want me to believe that one of my parents is a...I can’t even say it. A *god*? My dad can barely throw a baseball, let alone a spear. My mom drives a minivan. They eat at Olive Garden. They’re in a *bowling league*. They’re the two most un-godlike people ever.”

“Well...” Sam shifted uncomfortably. “I’m really not the person who should be telling you this...but you know how sometimes one bird lays an egg in *another* bird’s nest and then...or, wait. No. Did you ever maybe hear about how when there’s a kid who everyone totally loves, but they aren’t quite sure who...no, wait...”

“Hold on.” I felt slightly dizzy as Sam’s meaning became clear. “Are you saying I’m *adopted*?”

“Definitely by one of them. Maybe both...I don’t really know. But I *do* know that they both know what you are. They’re the ones who requested a satyr when you were little, and they’ve been model parents. I actually think they should write a handbook: *What to Expect When You’re Expecting a Demigod*...”

“Sam, this is ridiculous!”

He just stared at me, allowing time for the truth to sink in.

The sad thing was, I *didn’t* really find it ridiculous. My whole life had been one weird incident after another. Just this morning, my principal and guidance counselor had been disposed of by a talking lioness who enjoyed personality quizzes. My best friend turned out to be a satyr. Given all that, me being a demigod wasn’t so hard to believe.

And I’d always known there was something strange about my past. My folks got nervous whenever I asked questions about when I was a baby. There were no pictures of me before the age of two.

But if I really *was* a demigod...what did that mean? And who was my godly parent?

I shook it off and looked at Sam. “So that business at the aquarium with the otter, and the exploding tray of enchiladas, and the earthquake in the chemistry lab—”



“Yes,” Sam said. “It’s all because of who you are. Demigods are always surrounded by strange events. *You* more than most.”

“Why me more than most?”

Sam glanced nervously over my shoulder. “I don’t know. Honestly, for years I’ve been watching you, trying to figure out who your godly parent is—”

“You make me sound like a science experiment.” The words tasted bitter in my mouth. “I thought you were my friend.”

“I am! I wouldn’t have stuck around if I wasn’t your friend! But I’m also your *protector*. The gods have some sort of plan for you. I’m sure of that. And while we figure out what it is, it’s my job to keep you alive.”

My brain spun like a gyroscope. One more crazy fact, and my head would fly apart from centrifugal force. “So...where do we go now? My house? Your house?”

“No,” Sam said. “The monsters would find you. I know a few gathering places for demigods. Normally I could take you to one of those, but none of them is close, and right now, they’re not really safe. Gaea is rising. The monsters are taking over—”

“Wait, what’s rising?”

“It’s too complicated to explain.” Sam wrung his hands. “Look, there’s a safe house in town. The old library—”

“That’s been closed for years.”

“Yeah, but monsters hate the place. I’ve stored some supplies there for emergencies. If we can get inside, we can at least get you a weapon and maybe some advice from the gods.”

I didn’t see how we’d get godly advice at an abandoned library.

The problem was, I didn’t have any better plan.

Another howl sounded in the distance.

Sam flinched. “That’s the other *leonte*.”

“*Leonte*? You mean a lion monster, like Ms. Roche?”

“They always hunt in pairs.” He took a deep breath. “Okay. We’re just across from the old mill. So I see three options for reaching the library. We can stay in the woods until we get to town, but we’ll have to find a way over the river. Or we can try to get across the old mason bridge. Or we head to the main road and try to catch a ride. Each way should get us to the library, but honestly I don’t know which one will be the safest.” Ms. Roche’s lion buddy howled again, closer, and Sam looked at me. “You have to pick one, and fast.”

“You want *me* to pick?” I asked incredulously. “Yeah, that seems like a great idea, Sam. Let’s have the guy who just had his entire life turned

upside down figure out how to avoid getting eaten by a giant lion.”

“Zane, if I knew the best way, believe me, I would say so. But I don’t. So someone has to decide, and like it or not, life-or-death decisions are what you were born to do. Satyrs? Not so much. But heroes...?”

“Heroes...” I echoed.

“You have to learn how to make smart decisions. And right now seems like as good of a time as any to start.”

“I really don’t think...”

“Trust your gut. What feels right?”

I thought about the fast moving rapids, then tried to remember the bridge. It was really just a few wooden slats supported by a loose wire truss. I’m sure it used to have guide ropes, but they had long ago rotted away. I turned and looked toward the highway, a broken stretch of asphalt about 100 yards away.

“Well?” said Sam. “We gotta try one of them. What do you think?”

**Select a choice:**

[WOODS](#)

[BRIDGE](#)

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*WARNING! You're about to spoil a great story by not making a choice!  
Page back, then click one of the links to advance the story. Otherwise,  
the next section may not make any sense to you.*

“The woods,” I blurted out before I could think too much.

Sam nodded. “Are you sure?”

“Am I...? Were you not listening to me at all? NO! Of course I’m not sure. You told me to trust my gut, and my gut says it wants to get away from grumpy cat. Fast.”

Sam exhaled, clearly relieved. “Good. I like the woods.”

Together we sprinted through the trees until we reached the edge of the river. I was having second thoughts as we stared at the frothing water, the swirling eddies, the sharp-edged rocks...until a loud growl brought me back to my new reality.

Sam shuddered. “Give me your folder. Just in case.”

I hadn’t even thought about the red folder getting ruined. I handed it to Sam, who pulled a Ziploc bag out of his backpack. He wrapped up the folder and stuffed it in his bag.

“Why do you always carry Ziplocs?” I asked.

“They make great snacks.”

I hoped he was kidding. Then again, I had no idea what satyrs considered tasty junk food.

I took a few steps back and inhaled deeply.

Another roar, this time much closer.

“Go!” said Sam, and I sprinted for the river. When I reached its bank, I planted my foot in the soft mud and took a wild leap. I knew immediately that I’d misjudged the distance, and I flailed my arms as I crashed near the opposite bank.

I landed hard in the shallow water, a small boulder high-fiving my chest and smashing the wind out of me. I moaned as I clung to the slippery rock and tried to catch my breath, the howls of the *leonte* growing closer.

Two hooves landed with a *thump* right in front of my face, and I looked up to see Sam there, staring down at me with a concerned look. “Not sure this was the best decision,” he said, reaching down and yanking me to my feet. I winced, ignoring the pain shooting through my limbs. “We’re stuck with it, though, so come on.”

He took off running through the woods, and I did my best to follow. My knee ached from the fall, and I was sure my chest was bruised. Five minutes...then ten. How far *was* this place?

Sam had to keep stopping to wait for me. “I think the *leonte* ran downstream,” he said, anxiously looking behind me. “Probably looking

for a better place to cross. That'll buy us a little more time, but we really, really have to hurry."

Too winded to speak, I nodded and gulped as much air as I could. Sweat poured down my face and my thighs screamed in protest. Twice I fell and had to be hauled to my feet by my satyr protector.

I was contemplating whether death by lion would be more or less painful than a heart attack when we burst into a clearing behind the old public library.

"Yes!" said Sam. "Let's get inside!"

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"There's a goddess...?"

Sam nodded and descended into the cellar. I didn't feel so sure about following him into the dark, but I also didn't want to wait around for the *leonte* to catch up. I climbed down the steps and closed the door behind us.

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"S-Sam? What's that?" I whispered, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

Sam paused to listen before taking his next step down. "Oh, I'm sure it's just—"

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I heard him laugh, then pause. “It’ll probably get worse.”

“It can’t get worse. This is the worst. The worst thing ever. In the whole wide world. That’s ever happened. Ever.”

He was quiet for a second. “But if you can get through this, you can probably get through anything, right? In the whole wide world? Ever?”

“Do you enjoy being annoying?” I asked. Then I sighed, knowing he was right. I had to start facing my fears if I wanted to be a hero. “What do we do?”

“They won’t hurt us,” he said. “Just stay calm and move slowly. Slide your feet along the floor, and they won’t even know you’re there.”

I tried to prevent myself from hyperventilating again, and to slow my racing heartbeat. *Get it together, Zane*, I thought. I nodded, then realized Sam couldn’t see me. “Okay,” I managed. “Let’s do it.”

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“One...” said Sam, and I closed my eyes, sucking in a deep breath. “Two...Three.”

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"It's a statue of a goddess, and the gods are real. She's one of the early Titan deities, one of the *good* Titans. She's the mother of the Nine Muses who oversee all the arts: music, poetry, dancing, and whatnot. Anyway, libraries are Mnemosyne's sacred place. Her spirit is strong here. She *protects* this place."

I looked around at the ruined furniture and piles of trash. "She's doing a great job."

"Seriously, be more respectful." Sam glanced at the goddess's face. "Her presence will keep the monsters at bay. At least...it should. We'll get our supplies together, rest here for the night, and figure out our next move."

"Our next move..." My heart sank. "So even if we defeat this other lion that's following us—"

"There will always be more monsters," Sam said grimly. "Now that they've located you, they'll never stop trying to kill you. You're a demigod. Your life...well, from here on out, it'll be hard. But I'll be with you. You're not alone."

I appreciated Sam saying that, but I was starting to process the fact that I couldn't go home. Not tonight. Maybe not ever. My life had

fundamentally changed. I would never be able to go back to *anything* resembling normal.

Sam approached the base of the statue. He pushed the bronze plaque inscribed with the goddess's name. The pedestal hissed, and the front part swung open like a refrigerator door.

Inside was a locker almost as tall as I was. I spotted two hiking packs with bedrolls and water bottles. And hanging on the back wall of the cabinet was a sheathed sword with a blue gem glowing faintly on the pommel.

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"There you are." The lion's voice was definitely male. His snarling face was wreathed in a shaggy golden mane. His fully extended claws gleamed white. He rose on his haunches, which only made him look scarier. "You destroyed my sister," he snarled. "Now I will destroy you."

My lungs deflated like old helium balloons. "Your—your sister? You mean you and Ms. Roche—"

"We are *leontes*!" the lion bellowed. "The children of Atalanta! We always hunt in pairs. Normally, the female has the honor of the kill, but since you sent her back to Tartarus—"

"Wait." I was hoping if I bought us a little time, Sam could get us out of this somehow. Maybe one of the packs in the cabinet contained a few hand grenades or possibly a bazooka. "Um, Mr. Lion...sorry, but I always like to know who's killing me. You said you're a child of who?"

"Atalanta!" he cried. "The most famous Greek heroine! A glorious hunter. The fastest of runners. She and our father Hippomenes were cursed by that ridiculous love goddess Aphrodite simply because they forgot to make a few sacrifices during their wedding ceremony. Aphrodite changed them into lions! Ever since, we their descendants have prowled the world, looking for revenge. Since we cannot destroy the gods, we destroy their children!"

I was out of magical tree-growing gold coins, so I glanced at Sam, hoping he had found a bazooka. Sadly, he was frozen in terror. He may have been my self-proclaimed protector, but at the moment he was about as helpful as the statue of Nemo Sign.

"Well, Mr. Lion..." My voice sounded as squeaky as Mickey Mouse. "I can tell you're upset. But, uh, I don't even know the gods. I didn't know I was a demigod until like an hour ago—"

“Good!” snarled the lion. “I will destroy you before you learn your powers!”

I looked around frantically. Should I go for the sword? Or try to outwit the lion?

The lion tensed to pounce.

**Select a choice:**

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“The bridge,” I said. “Maybe I can figure out a way to get us across.”

“You sure?” asked Sam, wrinkling his nose.

“Am I...? Were you not listening to me at all? NO! Of course I’m not sure. You told me to trust my gut, and my gut says it doesn’t want to try jumping those rapids. Come on.”

Together we sprinted through the trees until we reached the old bridge. I knelt to take a closer look, doing my best to ignore the howls of the *leonte*.

“The supports are fine,” I said, tugging on the wire truss, and kicking the concrete block where it connected to the shore. “The problem is those wooden slats. They’re pretty rotten. I don’t think they’ll support our weight.”

“Um, okay,” said Sam, looking around nervously. “You can fix it? Like, fast?”

I scanned the area, relieved to see several suitable branches. “Yeah, bring me as many of those branches as you can—the thicker the better.”

Sam and I dragged the branches over to the bridge. I lined them up so the ends were facing each river bank, then slid them out over the rotting slats. “We’ll use these to distribute our weight. It should keep the wood from breaking.”

“Should?”

“Yeah...should. I’ll go first.” I put a cautious foot onto the layer of branches, feeling for any give. Everything seemed okay, so I pulled my left foot onto the bridge, keeping it as far as possible behind my right. I looked at Sam, smiled, and scooted both my feet and the branches forward, keeping my weight spread out. I inched along, then hopped easily onto the opposite bank.

Sam had already laid out a new set of branches on the far side.

“Come on,” I said.

Just then, the foliage behind him rustled and the *leonte* leapt out.

Sam yelped and trotted onto the ancient bridge, holding his arms out to the sides for balance. But where my sneakers gripped the wood, his hooves slipped and slid. I gathered a few larger branches from my side, trying to make it easier for him.

He took a few more steps and froze at the sound of cracking wood.

“What do I do?” he said, eyes wide.

“Step as lightly as possible,” I said, “and walk toward me.”

I’d never seen him so frightened. “I can’t do it.”

“You *can* do it, Sam. Remember the time I fell off Parker’s roof and you carried me all the way home?”

Sam nodded slightly, but otherwise remained frozen.

“You kept saying ‘One more step, one more step,’ remember?” Sam nodded again. “Do the same thing, okay? One more step.”

Sam took a step forward.

The *leonte* roared.

“One more step,” I said.

He took another step. Then another.

“Almost there!” I said. “One more step!”

And then he was across, collapsing theatrically beside me.

Before we could celebrate, the *leonte* put an enormous paw onto the bridge, testing it.

“Come on,” I said. “Help me!” I leaned forward and started madly brushing the branches off the bridge and into the rapids below.

Sam picked up a few rocks and threw them at the *leonte*, causing the monster to pause momentarily before bellowing with rage and then continuing his way across.

I’d never be able to knock the rest of the branches off in time. I scanned the area, spotting a few rocks the size of bowling balls. “Bigger ones!” I shouted. “Throw bigger rocks!”

I picked one up and hefted it onto the bridge. The old planks creaked under the added weight, and the *leonte* stopped, suddenly looking uncertain.

“Yeah!” shouted Sam, as we both hurled more boulders onto the fragile wood.

The *leonte* roared with frustration, then took another step. As it shifted its weight onto a plank, the wood snapped in half. The *leonte*’s paw shot through the gap and then its whole body fell onto the rotting bridge, shattering nearly every plank.

The *leonte* howled as it fell into the rushing rapids, and I couldn’t help but smile as it was whisked downstream, its cries growing fainter by the second.

“You did it!” said Sam.

“We did it,” I said, smiling.

“Fair enough,” said Sam. “Now let’s go. That river won’t distract him for long.”

We turned and sprinted through the woods, leaping over fallen trees and avoiding brambles.

After about ten minutes, Sam and I burst into a clearing behind the old public library.

“Yes!” said Sam. “Let’s get inside!”

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“The road,” I said. “It looked like there were a lot of cars up there. We can get someone to help us out.”

“I don’t know...” said Sam. “You’re not, like, great with adults.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said, and took off for the road, Sam hot on my heels. His breathing whistled and puffed exactly like a horse or...a goat. *So let’s see*, I thought. *I need to convince someone to let a half-animal, half-man into their car and drive us to an abandoned library.* I didn’t feel very good about our chances, but I felt worse about staying in the forest.

We got to the cracked asphalt and stopped, looking into the distance in either direction.

“No cars,” said Sam, his voice tight. He looked back toward the forest.

“Yeah, I see that,” I said.

“Should we go back?” As if in answer to his question, a howl echoed out of the woods and the treetops quivered like something very large was shaking them.

Just when I was thinking I’d made the wrong choice, I spotted a small red dot moving toward us, wavering in the heat reflecting off the road. “There!”

Sam spun around and pumped his fist in the air. “Yes! Okay, look. We probably only have one shot at this, so remember to make eye contact and smile. And don’t mumble. And relax your shoulders. And stand up straight. And don’t shift your weight...”

“I got it!” I said and stepped into the middle of the road, waving my hands in the air, rehearsing what I was going to say. Sam was right to worry. I wasn’t always good at reading people or talking to adults. But I understood the stakes. This time, I had no room for error.

A red convertible came flying toward me, then braked hard, its engine slowing to a low, even idle under a wall of music. The driver revved it and gestured for me to get out of the way.

Instead, I pasted a big smile on my face and walked toward the front of the car. “Hi, sir,” I shouted over the thumping bass, “Thanks for stopping.”

The man, in his early thirties, had stylishly messy brown hair. He was wearing dark aviator sunglasses and a crisp blue button-down rolled up at the sleeves, revealing an expensive-looking wristwatch.

I kept the smile plastered on my face and gestured to Sam as I continued to shout. “My friend and I are just trying to get to the library,

and we need some help.”

He reached forward, quieting the music. “Sorry, I’m not from around here and I’m in a hurry. You’ll have to catch another ride.” He put his hand on the gearshift.

“Well, we *would* just wait for the next car, but we’re trying to... umm...meet my mother. She works there. S-she’s a librarian. And, and she gets *really* upset when we’re late.” My words were halting and awkward. I sounded like exactly what I was: a liar.

“Then why don’t you call her to pick you up? I don’t have time for this.” His right arm moved, and I heard the gears shift as he turned to look over his right shoulder. Another howl echoed from the woods, this time, much closer.

“*Please*, sir.” I stepped forward. “My friend has a...a hurt leg. And, and...And I’m having a hard time breathing...”

The man smiled. “And, and...And I’m having a hard time getting you to understand that it’s *really* not my problem.” He reversed the car down the road about ten feet, punched the stereo back on, then pulled around us and sped away, leaving us alone...again.

“Well, that went well,” said Sam, glancing back at the forest. “We can either wait for another car to show up, head back to the bridge, or stay in the woods and try to jump the river. What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” I said, embarrassed by my failure. “Maybe I’m no good at making decisions. You have to help me.”

Sam shook his head. “I don’t know either. It might be too late to go back, so maybe we *are* better off waiting for another car. But if that goes anything like this just did...we’re lion kibble.” He stared at me, waiting for me to decide.

I thought for a moment.



**Select a choice:**

[ROAD AGAIN](#)

[WOODS](#)

[BRIDGE](#)

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The *leonte* uncoiled his limbs like a spring and hurtled through the air. As he did, I turned and leapt toward the locker, hoping to reach the sword. Though I managed to avoid the swiping lion claws, I landed far short of the glowing blade.

I scrambled forward, but the *leonte* leapt again, landing between me and the locker. He laughed. “Not much of a hero,” he said. “I was expecting more of a challenge.”

He took one leisurely step forward as I looked around frantically for something...anything. But my pockets were empty and there wasn’t even a book or a scrap of paper within arm’s reach. The *leonte* stood above me, raised one massive paw, and...

...howled in pain, his eyes widening in surprise. He slumped to the ground, revealing Sam, the glowing blade quivering in his hands. I shouted in surprise and Sam quickly tossed me the sword, as if it was a dirty tissue. I scrambled to my feet, pointing the weapon at the *leonte*’s crumpled form.

“Miserable demigod!” The lion’s fur disintegrated. His limbs crumbled into columns of yellow powder. “You will never succeed! Your quest will not...”

He collapsed into a pile of dust.

For a moment, the library was as silent as...well, a library.

Sam let out a delayed bleat. “Wow! That—that was—”

“Terrifying?” I asked. My hands shook. My legs could barely hold up my weight.

I had officially reached *maximum weirdness overload*. I wanted to crawl into Sam’s secret storage cabinet, close the door, and cry for a week.

Instead, things just got weirder.

*YOU HAVE DONE WELL.* A woman’s voice echoed around the abandoned room.

Wind swept through the broken window, ruffling the open books, blowing torn pages across the floor.

Dust motes swirled in a shaft of sunlight, solidifying into the form of a woman. She wore luminous white robes covered in intricate black patterns...*words*, I realized, as if her clothes were woven from e-reader screens. Dark hair curled around her timeless face. Her eyes bored right through me.

Sam bowed. “Your—Your Greatness. Your Most Well-Read Majesty.”

“Mnemosyne,” I guessed. “The goddess of memory.”

The goddess inclined her head. “And you are the hero I have heard so much about.”

I realized I was pointing my weapon at the goddess, which probably wasn’t a smart idea. I lowered it. “You’ve heard about me?”

“Oh, yes.” Mnemosyne sighed. “I never forget a story, or a name, or a face. Actually, I never forget anything. Being the memory goddess can be quite annoying. I saw this *horrible* Ben Stiller movie fifteen years ago and I *still* can’t get the dialogue out of my mind.”

“Uh, okay,” I said. “But getting back to me...”

“Yes,” the goddess agreed. She scanned the ruins of the library. “You did me a service, cleansing this place of the monster’s filth. Once, this was a holy site of learning, reading, and free Internet. Alas, the mortals consider such things of little value. You, my young hero, have many adventures ahead of you. Your quest will be remembered for centuries, written about in many books...assuming, of course, you survive. To aid in your journey, I offer you a gift.” The goddess swept her white robes aside to reveal a small wooden lectern with three items on top of it. “Depending on how well you know yourself, it may help you. Or not. Choose wisely.”

*What kind of gifts would a goddess give?* I thought. *Gold? Frankincense? An iPod?* I walked excitedly over to the lectern, but my heart sank when I scanned the items: an old library card, a battered pair of glasses, and a small section of white cloth.

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*Very helpful,* I thought. I guess he was serious about me making all the decisions.

Slowly, I extended my hand and took the library card.

The goddess nodded and her robes swung forward, enveloping the lectern. “An excellent choice, my young hero,” she said. “I wish you well.”

“Wait!” I gulped. “Do you—do you know who my godly parent is?”

“Ah...” The lines around the goddess’s eyes tightened, almost as if she felt sorry for me. “That you must learn for yourself. I can only set you on the path.”

She turned to Sam. “My young satyr Greenwood, you must lead your friend to Austin. There you will find the answers you seek.”

“Austin, Texas...?” Sam’s face blanched. “But Austin has, um, those *special* monsters...”

“Yes, it does,” said the goddess. “Your quest will not be easy, but it *is* necessary.” She looked at me again. “If you would know your true parentage, go to Austin. Seek out the river god Barton. Do not forget me, hero. Rest assured, I will not forget you.”

The goddess dissolved into sunlight.

Sam made a small whimpering noise. “Austin...oh, I still have nightmares about Austin.”

I tried to control my racing heartbeat. I couldn’t quite believe I’d had a conversation with an immortal goddess. “What—what happened to you in Austin? What kind of river god is named *Barton*? And what are those *special* monsters you mentioned?”

His lower lip quivered. “I’ll tell you all that when we get closer. I promise. If I have to talk about it now...”

His eyes welled with tears. I realized Sam was even more shaken up about today’s events than I was. So yeah, maybe he knew all about this weird world of gods and monsters. And maybe the gods had assigned him to protect me. But he was still my friend, and I would have to step up and protect him, too.

I looked around at all the scattered books, covered with dust. Mnemosyne had claimed that my deeds would be written about someday, assuming I survived. I didn’t care about being famous. I *did* care about surviving. If I had to be in a story, I didn’t want the ending to read: *And he died painfully.*

“It’s going to be all right,” I told Sam. “We’re in this together. I don’t like the idea of staying here overnight, though. How about we get going?”

Sam took a deep breath. “Yeah. It’s a long way to Austin.”

“Then let’s get started.” I grabbed one of the hiking packs and slung it over my shoulder. “Let’s go find out who my godly parent is.”

[GO TO AUSTIN](#)

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“A ch-challenge!” I managed to shout, wracking my brain for facts about lions, hoping they would also apply to *leontes*.

He stopped, the hint of a smile flitting across his massive jowls.

“What do you mean, ‘a challenge’?”

“Your sister challenged me with a riddle and promised to let me go if I answered it correctly. I answered it and the gods struck her down.”

The *leonte* looked around nervously. “You lie.”

Sam sidled closer to me and whispered, “I think you’re thinking of the sphinx.”

“You’re the king of the jungle, aren’t you? Everyone knows kings must be stronger *and* smarter.”

“That’s true,” said the *leonte*. “But I am sure my sister did not offer you a challenge. And if she did, you certainly did not outwit her. She was the cleverest daughter of Atalanta.”

“And I suppose you’re the cleverest son?” I tried to remember a riddle—*any* riddle.

“Of course,” he said, sitting back on his haunches, licking his lips mightily. I heard Sam squeak.

“Then you wouldn’t mind proving it,” I said. “After all, the gods *are* watching...even Aphrodite.”

The *leonte* leapt to his feet and growled. “I will accept your challenge. And then I will destroy you, *demigod*.” He began to pace the room, waiting.

I walked over toward the locker, keeping my back to it and my eyes averted. “I’ll ask you the same riddle your sister asked me. If you answer it correctly, I will kneel and accept my fate. If you fail, you kneel in front of me.”

“Zane,” said Sam, his voice quivering, “*what are you doing?*”

“Ask it, then,” snarled the *leonte*.

“Okay,” I said, clearing my throat. “Here is your riddle. Um...

“Hurry,” snarled the *leonte*. “Ask it just as she did.”

“What is the only thing you can see in the dark?” I blurted out.

“In the dark?” asked the *leonte*, pacing the room. I edged closer to the closet.

“Yes. In the dark. Exactly as your sister asked me.”

“And you answered this correctly?”

“In seconds. I just closed my eyes to look in the dark and I saw the answer,” I said with as much bravado as I could muster.

“Hm,” the *leonte* said and sat, thinking.



Sam looked at me and I nodded with what I hoped was confidence as I moved a few steps closer to the locker.

The *leonte* glared at me, then at Sam. After a moment, he carefully closed his eyes and I lunged for the locker, unsheathing the sword and slashing the blade across the monster's chest. He collapsed, howling in pain. The blade glowed with a faint bronze light.

"Miserable demigod!" The lion's fur disintegrated. His limbs crumbled into columns of yellow powder. "You will never succeed! Your quest will not..."

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[GO TO AUSTIN](#)

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“Woods,” I said slowly, worrying that the *leonte* was simply waiting at the edge of the tree line for us to come back.

Sam nodded, thinking. “Maybe that’s a better choice.”

“Has to be better than this one,” I said, starting back toward the forest.

“Not necessarily,” said Sam.

Together we carefully entered the woods. Not seeing any sign of the *leonte*, we sprinted through the trees until we reached the edge of the river. I was having second thoughts as we stared at the frothing water, the swirling eddies, the sharp-edged rocks...until a loud growl brought me back to my new reality.

Sam shuddered. “Give me your folder. Just in case.”

I hadn’t even thought about the red folder getting ruined. I handed it to Sam, who pulled a Ziploc bag out of his backpack. He wrapped up the folder and stuffed it in his bag.

“Why do you always carry Ziplocs?” I asked.

“They make great snacks.”

I hoped he was kidding. Then again, I had no idea what satyrs considered tasty junk food.

I took a few steps back and inhaled deeply.

Another roar, this time much closer.

“Go!” said Sam, and I sprinted for the river. When I reached its bank, I planted my foot in the soft mud and took a wild leap. I knew immediately that I’d misjudged the distance, and I flailed my arms as I crashed near the opposite bank.

I landed hard in the shallow water, a small boulder high-fiving my chest and smashing the wind out of me. I moaned as I clung to the slippery rock and tried to catch my breath, the howls of the *leonte* growing closer.

Two hooves landed with a *thump* right in front of my face, and I looked up to see Sam there, staring down at me with a concerned look. “Not sure this was the best decision,” he said, reaching down and yanking me to my feet. I winced, ignoring the pain shooting through my limbs. “We’re stuck with it, though, so come on.”

He took off running through the woods, and I did my best to follow. My knee ached from the fall, and I was sure my chest was bruised. Five minutes...then ten. How far was this place?

Sam had to keep stopping to wait for me. “I think the *leonte* ran downstream,” he said, anxiously looking behind me. “Probably looking

for a better place to cross. That'll buy us a little more time, but we really, really have to hurry."

Too winded to speak, I nodded and gulped as much air as I could. Sweat poured down my face and my thighs screamed in protest. Twice I fell and had to be hauled to my feet by my satyr protector.

I was contemplating whether death by lion would be more or less painful than a heart attack when we burst into a clearing behind the old public library.

"Yes!" said Sam. "Let's get inside!"

The town library had been shut down several years ago—something about state funding cuts. With its red brick facade, white columns, and clock tower, the library had always been the nicest building on Main Street. Now that it was closed, it felt like the town's heart had stopped beating.

The windows were dark. The main entrance was boarded up. Taggers had spray-painted neon graffiti across the front steps.

"How do we get in?" I asked.

"Around the side." Sam led me to a storm cellar entrance half-hidden in the bushes. A big padlock hung from the latch, but Sam produced a key from his backpack and opened the lock.

"You're full of surprises," I noticed.

Sam shrugged. "It's nothing fancy inside, but at least the goddess might protect us."

"There's a goddess...?"

Sam nodded and descended into the cellar. I didn't feel so sure about following him into the dark, but I also didn't want to wait around for the *leonte* to catch up. I climbed down the steps and closed the door behind us.

That's when I heard it...the rustle of little feet scurrying across the floor. And *squeaking*. Lots of squeaking.

"S-Sam? What's that?" I whispered, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

Sam paused to listen before taking his next step down. "Oh, I'm sure it's just—"

"*Rats*," I blurted, a shudder running through my body. "Oh, no. I can't go down there, Sam. I can't."

"Oh," said Sam. "That's right." He pulled a flashlight from his backpack, wincing as the beam swept across rows of moldering

cardboard boxes, stacks of folding chairs...and a moving, furry floor. There were rats *everywhere*—hundreds of them. My chest clenched up, and I felt like the walls were closing in. I turned and started back up the stairs, but Sam grabbed me and shook his head. “The *leonte*,” he whispered.

“But you *know* how I feel about rats,” I said.

“You’re going to have to get over it,” said Sam. “There’s really no other choice.”

I took a deep breath. The basement smelled of mildew and rust and wet fur (though I guessed that last smell could be from Sam). He panned the flashlight over the writhing, squeaking floor, landing the beam on a small set of stairs directly opposite us. “There,” he said. “Those stairs lead to the main reading room. If we can make it across, we’ll be safe.”

“But how?” I said. “There must be a million of them!”

“Maybe you can get on my shoulders?” said Sam doubtfully.

“And risk you dropping me in the middle of the rat ocean? Fat chance.”

“Well, do you have any other ideas?” asked Sam, shining the light around the room.

Something brushed against my leg and I jumped straight up in the air, trying not to scream. This was literally my worst nightmare come true.

“There’re no other options?” I asked, angry that my voice sounded so weak and frightened.

“Um,” said Sam. “Not really, no.”

I nodded, glad the darkness was hiding my face. “This hero thing is the worst.”

I heard him laugh, then pause. “It’ll probably get worse.”

“It can’t get worse. This is the worst. The worst thing ever. In the whole wide world. That’s ever happened. Ever.”

He was quiet for a second. “But if you can get through this, you can probably get through anything, right? In the whole wide world? Ever?”

“Do you enjoy being annoying?” I asked. Then I sighed, knowing he was right. I had to start facing my fears if I wanted to be a hero. “What do we do?”

“They won’t hurt us,” he said. “Just stay calm and move slowly. Slide your feet along the floor, and they won’t even know you’re there.”

I tried to prevent myself from hyperventilating again, and to slow my racing heartbeat. *Get it together, Zane*, I thought. I nodded, then realized Sam couldn’t see me. “Okay,” I managed. “Let’s do it.”



“I’m right here if anything happens,” said Sam. “I promise it’ll be okay.”

“I don’t wanna talk about it anymore. Let’s just do it.”

“Okay,” said Sam. “I’ll point the light at the stairs. Just focus on those, not the floor. Hold onto my backpack,” he said, pulling it tight over both shoulders.

I bit my lip and grabbed his bag, trying not to think about all those sharp little claws and weird naked tails and beady eyes.

“On three, okay?” said Sam, and I was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude that I had a friend like him, someone who could literally get me to overcome my worst fears. *Focus on that*, I thought. *Focus on the good*.

“One...” said Sam, and I closed my eyes, sucking in a deep breath. “Two...Three.”

We both exhaled as Sam slowly stepped forward, sliding his feet along the floor underneath the squirming masses. I followed, struggling to hold onto his bag, nearly tripping down the stairs. As my second foot reached the floor, I squeezed my eyes even tighter and focused on matching my breath to the shuffling of our feet. IN. Slide right, slide left. OUT. Slide right, slide left. IN. Just sliding along. OUT. Nothing creepy going on.

Then...before I knew it, Sam’s backpack lifted as we stepped onto the opposite staircase.

He turned to me. “You did it!” he exclaimed. As he hugged me, the flashlight cast weird shadows across the walls.

Blood pumped in my ears and I could barely hear the squeaking anymore. I *did* do it. Maybe there was something heroic inside of me after all.

I cleared my throat, hoping my voice would come out strong. “Thanks,” I said. “Let’s get upstairs.”

Sam pointed the light up at a door, then bowed and extended his arm. “After you,” he said. “You earned it.”

My knees were weak as I climbed into the library’s main reading room. I hadn’t been there since I was a little kid. Stacks of books marched off in all directions. A few bookshelves had been overturned. Some books formed piles in the corners like snowdrifts. Others were torn and strewn around, smashed by muddy footprints. Judging from the piles of wrappers and cans, and the articles of old clothing strewn across the furniture, we weren’t the only ones who had discovered a way in. On the marble floor near the exit were the remnants of an old campfire.

I had mixed feelings about this place, but whatever you thought of libraries, there was no denying that this one was sad. Nobody had even bothered to sell or give away the books. The building had just been abandoned. Even the transients or local teenagers who'd broken in over the years didn't care enough to bother with the books—except to use them as tinder for fires.

In the center of the room, under the ornate domed ceiling, a ten-foot-tall statue stood on a high pedestal.

The figure wore flowing robes. She held an open book in one hand like she was about to recite a poem. Her face was beautiful but stern. Her dark hair fell in ringlets around her face.

I'm sure I'd seen the statue before, but I'd never paid it much attention. Now I realized what it was.

"A Greek goddess?" I asked.

Sam nodded. "The goddess of memory and language: Mnemosyne."

He pronounced it like *Nemo Sign*, though as far as I could tell, the goddess had nothing to do with cartoon fish.

"Never heard of her," I admitted. "She's not one of the *big* gods, I guess."

Sam cleared his throat. "I wouldn't say things like that."

"It's only a statue."

"It's a statue of a goddess, and the gods are real. She's one of the early Titan deities, one of the *good* Titans. She's the mother of the Nine Muses who oversee all the arts: music, poetry, dancing, and whatnot. Anyway, libraries are Mnemosyne's sacred place. Her spirit is strong here. She *protects* this place."

I looked around at the ruined furniture and piles of trash. "She's doing a great job."

"Seriously, be more respectful." Sam glanced at the goddess's face. "Her presence will keep the monsters at bay. At least...it should. We'll get our supplies together, rest here for the night, and figure out our next move."

"Our next move..." My heart sank. "So even if we defeat this other lion that's following us—"

"There will always be more monsters," Sam said grimly. "Now that they've located you, they'll never stop trying to kill you. You're a demigod. Your life...well, from here on out, it'll be hard. But I'll be with you. You're not alone."

I appreciated Sam saying that, but I was starting to process the fact that I couldn't go home. Not tonight. Maybe not ever. My life had

fundamentally changed. I would never be able to go back to *anything* resembling normal.

Sam approached the base of the statue. He pushed the bronze plaque inscribed with the goddess's name. The pedestal hissed, and the front part swung open like a refrigerator door.

Inside was a locker almost as tall as I was. I spotted two hiking packs with bedrolls and water bottles. And hanging on the back wall of the cabinet was a sheathed sword with a blue gem glowing faintly on the pommel.

Before I could say anything, a glass window shattered behind me. A lion even bigger than Ms. Roche crashed through and landed only ten feet away.

"There you are." The lion's voice was definitely male. His snarling face was wreathed in a shaggy golden mane. His fully extended claws gleamed white. He rose on his haunches, which only made him look scarier. "You destroyed my sister," he snarled. "Now I will destroy you."

My lungs deflated like old helium balloons. "Your—your sister? You mean you and Ms. Roche—"

"We are *leontes*!" the lion bellowed. "The children of Atalanta! We always hunt in pairs. Normally, the female has the honor of the kill, but since you sent her back to Tartarus—"

"Wait." I was hoping if I bought us a little time, Sam could get us out of this somehow. Maybe one of the packs in the cabinet contained a few hand grenades or possibly a bazooka. "Um, Mr. Lion...sorry, but I always like to know who's killing me. You said you're a child of who?"

"Atalanta!" he cried. "The most famous Greek heroine! A glorious hunter. The fastest of runners. She and our father Hippomenes were cursed by that ridiculous love goddess Aphrodite simply because they forgot to make a few sacrifices during their wedding ceremony. Aphrodite changed them into lions! Ever since, we their descendants have prowled the world, looking for revenge. Since we cannot destroy the gods, we destroy their children!"

I was out of magical tree-growing gold coins, so I glanced at Sam, hoping he had found a bazooka. Sadly, he was frozen in terror. He may have been my self-proclaimed protector, but at the moment he was about as helpful as the statue of Nemo Sign.

"Well, Mr. Lion..." My voice sounded as squeaky as Mickey Mouse. "I can tell you're upset. But, uh, I don't even know the gods. I didn't know I was a demigod until like an hour ago—"

“Good!” snarled the lion. “I will destroy you before you learn your powers!”

I looked around frantically. Should I go for the sword? Or try to outwit the lion?

The lion tensed to pounce.

**Select a choice:**

[SWORD](#)

[OUTWIT](#)

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“Let’s go back to the bridge,” I said. “Maybe I can figure out a way to get us across.”

“You sure?” asked Sam, wrinkling his nose.

“Am I...? Of course not! I just almost got us killed! I told you—I *don’t know what I’m doing*. I just don’t think I can jump that river.”

Sam looked around nervously. “OK—But we should hurry. That *leonte* is somewhere in the woods.”

Together we carefully entered the woods. Not seeing any sign of the *leonte*, we sprinted through the trees until we reached the old bridge. I knelt to take a closer look.

“The supports are fine,” I said, tugging on the wire truss, and kicking the concrete block where it connected to the shore. “The problem is those wooden slats. They’re pretty rotten. I don’t think they’ll support our weight.”

“Um, okay,” said Sam, looking around nervously. “You can fix it? Like, fast?”

I scanned the area, relieved to see several suitable branches. “Yeah, bring me as many of those branches as you can—the thicker the better.”

Sam and I dragged the branches over to the bridge. I lined them up so the ends were facing each river bank, then slid them out over the rotting slats. “We’ll use these to distribute our weight. It should keep the wood from breaking.”

“Should?”

“Yeah...should. I’ll go first.” I put a cautious foot onto the layer of branches, feeling for any give. Everything seemed okay, so I pulled my left foot onto the bridge, keeping it as far as possible behind my right. I looked at Sam, smiled, and scooted both my feet and the branches forward, keeping my weight spread out. I inched along, then hopped easily onto the opposite bank.

Sam had already laid out a new set of branches on the far side.

“Come on,” I said.

Just then, the foliage behind him rustled and the *leonte* leapt out.

Sam yelped and trotted onto the ancient bridge, holding his arms out to the sides for balance. But where my sneakers gripped the wood, his hooves slipped and slid. I gathered a few larger branches from my side, trying to make it easier for him.

He took a few more steps and froze at the sound of cracking wood.

“What do I do?” he said, eyes wide.

“Step as lightly as possible,” I said, “and walk toward me.”

I'd never seen him so frightened. "I can't do it."

"You *can* do it, Sam. Remember the time I fell off Parker's roof and you carried me all the way home?"

Sam nodded slightly, but otherwise remained frozen.

"You kept saying 'One more step, one more step,' remember?" Sam nodded again. "Do the same thing, okay? One more step."

Sam took a step forward.

The *leonte* roared.

"One more step," I said.

He took another step. Then another.

"Almost there!" I said. "One more step!"

And then he was across, collapsing theatrically beside me.

Before we could celebrate, the *leonte* put an enormous paw onto the bridge, testing it.

"Come on," I said. "Help me!" I leaned forward and started madly brushing the branches off the bridge and into the rapids below.

Sam picked up a few rocks and threw them at the *leonte*, causing the monster to pause momentarily before bellowing with rage and then continuing his way across.

I'd never be able to knock the rest of the branches off in time. I scanned the area, spotting a few rocks the size of bowling balls. "Bigger ones!" I shouted.

"Throw bigger rocks!"

I picked one up and hefted it onto the bridge. The old planks creaked under the added weight, and the *leonte* stopped, suddenly looking uncertain.

"Yeah!" shouted Sam, as we both hurled more boulders onto the fragile wood.

The *leonte* roared with frustration, then took another step. As it shifted its weight onto a plank, the wood snapped in half. The *leonte*'s paw shot through the gap and then its whole body fell onto the rotting bridge, shattering nearly every plank.

The *leonte* howled as it fell into the rushing rapids, and I couldn't help but smile as it was whisked downstream, its cries growing fainter by the second.

"You did it!" said Sam.

"We did it," I said, smiling.

"Fair enough," said Sam. "Now let's go. That river won't distract him for long."



We turned and sprinted through the woods, leaping over fallen trees and avoiding brambles.

After about ten minutes, Sam and I burst into a clearing behind the old public library.

“Yes!” said Sam. “Let’s get inside!”

The town library had been shut down several years ago—something about state funding cuts. With its red brick facade, white columns, and clock tower, the library had always been the nicest building on Main Street. Now that it was closed, it felt like the town’s heart had stopped beating.

The windows were dark. The main entrance was boarded up. Taggers had spray-painted neon graffiti across the front steps.

“How do we get in?” I asked.

“Around the side.” Sam led me to a storm cellar entrance half-hidden in the bushes. A big padlock hung from the latch, but Sam produced a key from his backpack and opened the lock.

“You’re full of surprises,” I noticed.

Sam shrugged. “It’s nothing fancy inside, but at least the goddess might protect us.”

“There’s a goddess...?”

Sam nodded and descended into the cellar. I didn’t feel so sure about following him into the dark, but I also didn’t want to wait around for the *leonte* to catch up. I climbed down the steps and closed the door behind us.

That’s when I heard it...the rustle of little feet scurrying across the floor. And *squeaking*. Lots of squeaking.

“S-Sam? What’s that?” I whispered, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

Sam paused to listen before taking his next step down. “Oh, I’m sure it’s just—”

“Rats,” I blurted, a shudder running through my body. “Oh, no. I can’t go down there, Sam. I can’t.”

“Oh,” said Sam. “That’s right.” He pulled a flashlight from his backpack, wincing as the beam swept across rows of moldering cardboard boxes, stacks of folding chairs...and a moving, furry floor. There were rats *everywhere*—hundreds of them. My chest clenched up, and I felt like the walls were closing in. I turned and started back up the

stairs, but Sam grabbed me and shook his head. “The *leonte*,” he whispered.

“But you *know* how I feel about rats,” I said.

“You’re going to have to get over it,” said Sam. “There’s really no other choice.”

I took a deep breath. The basement smelled of mildew and rust and wet fur (though I guessed that last smell could be from Sam). He panned the flashlight over the writhing, squeaking floor, landing the beam on a small set of stairs directly opposite us. “There,” he said. “Those stairs lead to the main reading room. If we can make it across, we’ll be safe.”

“But how?” I said. “There must be a million of them!”

“Maybe you can get on my shoulders?” said Sam doubtfully.

“And risk you dropping me in the middle of the rat ocean? Fat chance.”

“Well, do you have any other ideas?” asked Sam, shining the light around the room.

Something brushed against my leg and I jumped straight up in the air, trying not to scream. This was literally my worst nightmare come true.

“There’re no other options?” I asked, angry that my voice sounded so weak and frightened.

“Um,” said Sam. “Not really, no.”

I nodded, glad the darkness was hiding my face. “This hero thing is the worst.”

I heard him laugh, then pause. “It’ll probably get worse.”

“It can’t get worse. This is the worst. The worst thing ever. In the whole wide world. That’s ever happened. Ever.”

He was quiet for a second. “But if you can get through this, you can probably get through anything, right? In the whole wide world? Ever?”

“Do you enjoy being annoying?” I asked. Then I sighed, knowing he was right. I had to start facing my fears if I wanted to be a hero. “What do we do?”

“They won’t hurt us,” he said. “Just stay calm and move slowly. Slide your feet along the floor, and they won’t even know you’re there.”

I tried to prevent myself from hyperventilating again, and to slow my racing heartbeat. *Get it together, Zane*, I thought. I nodded, then realized Sam couldn’t see me. “Okay,” I managed. “Let’s do it.”

“I’m right here if anything happens,” said Sam. “I promise it’ll be okay.”

“I don’t wanna talk about it anymore. Let’s just do it.”

“Okay,” said Sam. “I’ll point the light at the stairs. Just focus on those, not the floor. Hold onto my backpack,” he said, pulling it tight over both shoulders.

I bit my lip and grabbed his bag, trying not to think about all those sharp little claws and weird naked tails and beady eyes.

“On three, okay?” said Sam, and I was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude that I had a friend like him, someone who could literally get me to overcome my worst fears. *Focus on that*, I thought. *Focus on the good*.

“One...” said Sam, and I closed my eyes, sucking in a deep breath. “Two...Three.”

We both exhaled as Sam slowly stepped forward, sliding his feet along the floor underneath the squirming masses. I followed, struggling to hold onto his bag, nearly tripping down the stairs. As my second foot reached the floor, I squeezed my eyes even tighter and focused on matching my breath to the shuffling of our feet. IN. Slide right, slide left. OUT. Slide right, slide left. IN. Just sliding along. OUT. Nothing creepy going on.

Then...before I knew it, Sam’s backpack lifted as we stepped onto the opposite staircase.

He turned to me. “You did it!” he exclaimed. As he hugged me, the flashlight cast weird shadows across the walls.

Blood pumped in my ears and I could barely hear the squeaking anymore. I *did* do it. Maybe there was something heroic inside of me after all.

I cleared my throat, hoping my voice would come out strong. “Thanks,” I said. “Let’s get upstairs.”

Sam pointed the light up at a door, then bowed and extended his arm. “After you,” he said. “You earned it.”

My knees were weak as I climbed into the library’s main reading room. I hadn’t been there since I was a little kid. Stacks of books marched off in all directions. A few bookshelves had been overturned. Some books formed piles in the corners like snowdrifts. Others were torn and strewn around, smashed by muddy footprints. Judging from the piles of wrappers and cans, and the articles of old clothing strewn across the furniture, we weren’t the only ones who had discovered a way in. On the marble floor near the exit were the remnants of an old campfire.

I had mixed feelings about this place, but whatever you thought of libraries, there was no denying that this one was sad. Nobody had even bothered to sell or give away the books. The building had just been

abandoned. Even the transients or local teenagers who'd broken in over the years didn't care enough to bother with the books—except to use them as tinder for fires.

In the center of the room, under the ornate domed ceiling, a ten-foot-tall statue stood on a high pedestal.

The figure wore flowing robes. She held an open book in one hand like she was about to recite a poem. Her face was beautiful but stern. Her dark hair fell in ringlets around her face.

I'm sure I'd seen the statue before, but I'd never paid it much attention. Now I realized what it was.

"A Greek goddess?" I asked.

Sam nodded. "The goddess of memory and language: Mnemosyne."

He pronounced it like *Nemo Sign*, though as far as I could tell, the goddess had nothing to do with cartoon fish.

"Never heard of her," I admitted. "She's not one of the *big* gods, I guess."

Sam cleared his throat. "I wouldn't say things like that."

"It's only a statue."

"It's a statue of a goddess, and the gods are real. She's one of the early Titan deities, one of the *good* Titans. She's the mother of the Nine Muses who oversee all the arts: music, poetry, dancing, and whatnot. Anyway, libraries are Mnemosyne's sacred place. Her spirit is strong here. She *protects* this place."

I looked around at the ruined furniture and piles of trash. "She's doing a great job."

"Seriously, be more respectful." Sam glanced at the goddess's face. "Her presence will keep the monsters at bay. At least...it should. We'll get our supplies together, rest here for the night, and figure out our next move."

"Our next move..." My heart sank. "So even if we defeat this other lion that's following us—"

"There will always be more monsters," Sam said grimly. "Now that they've located you, they'll never stop trying to kill you. You're a demigod. Your life...well, from here on out, it'll be hard. But I'll be with you. You're not alone."

I appreciated Sam saying that, but I was starting to process the fact that I couldn't go home. Not tonight. Maybe not ever. My life had fundamentally changed. I would never be able to go back to *anything* resembling normal.

Sam approached the base of the statue. He pushed the bronze plaque inscribed with the goddess's name. The pedestal hissed, and the front part swung open like a refrigerator door.

Inside was a locker almost as tall as I was. I spotted two hiking packs with bedrolls and water bottles. And hanging on the back wall of the cabinet was a sheathed sword with a blue gem glowing faintly on the pommel.

Before I could say anything, a glass window shattered behind me. A lion even bigger than Ms. Roche crashed through and landed only ten feet away.

"There you are." The lion's voice was definitely male. His snarling face was wreathed in a shaggy golden mane. His fully extended claws gleamed white. He rose on his haunches, which only made him look scarier. "You destroyed my sister," he snarled. "Now I will destroy you."

My lungs deflated like old helium balloons. "Your—your sister? You mean you and Ms. Roche—"

"We are *leontes*!" the lion bellowed. "The children of Atalanta! We always hunt in pairs. Normally, the female has the honor of the kill, but since you sent her back to Tartarus—"

"Wait." I was hoping if I bought us a little time, Sam could get us out of this somehow. Maybe one of the packs in the cabinet contained a few hand grenades or possibly a bazooka. "Um, Mr. Lion...sorry, but I always like to know who's killing me. You said you're a child of who?"

"Atalanta!" he cried. "The most famous Greek heroine! A glorious hunter. The fastest of runners. She and our father Hippomenes were cursed by that ridiculous love goddess Aphrodite simply because they forgot to make a few sacrifices during their wedding ceremony. Aphrodite changed them into lions! Ever since, we their descendants have prowled the world, looking for revenge. Since we cannot destroy the gods, we destroy their children!"

I was out of magical tree-growing gold coins, so I glanced at Sam, hoping he had found a bazooka. Sadly, he was frozen in terror. He may have been my self-proclaimed protector, but at the moment he was about as helpful as the statue of Nemo Sign.

"Well, Mr. Lion..." My voice sounded as squeaky as Mickey Mouse. "I can tell you're upset. But, uh, I don't even know the gods. I didn't know I was a demigod until like an hour ago—"

"Good!" snarled the lion. "I will destroy you before you learn your powers!"

I looked around frantically. Should I go for the sword? Or try to outwit the lion?

The lion tensed to pounce.

**Select a choice:**

[SWORD](#)

[OUTWIT](#)

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“Let’s wait for another car. I really think I can convince the next person who comes by.”

Sam nodded. “Okay, I trust you. But you can’t screw this one up!”

“So much for trust! Don’t worry, I won’t.”

I walked back to the center of the road and scanned the horizon, waiting, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in my stomach. Time was running out. What if that...*thing* caught us? Each of its claws was nearly as big as my head.

“Zane!” Sam pointed down the road in the same direction the last car had come from.

My heart beat faster and I started waving and jumping up and down as the car approached. It was a small station wagon driven by an old woman—a *much better option*, I thought.

As the woman slowed and stopped, I ran around to the driver’s side window. “Thank you for stopping,” I said. “We need your help.”

The woman peered at me over small metal-framed glasses but kept the window rolled up. I continued, undeterred. “My friend and I need to get to the library to meet my mother. We’re late. Could you give us a ride? Please? It’s close by. We’re very nice...” She just stared at me with squished old woman eyes and shook her head. As I trailed off, she looked back toward the road and the car began rolling forward.

“No!” I said, walking alongside the car, looking nervously at the tree line. I knocked on the window, but that only made her press harder on the gas pedal. “We’re in trouble, ma’am. Please. We need help. You have to help us.”

“Zane?” said Sam nervously. “Look!”

I watched in horror as the trees wavered and the *leonte* charged out, running toward us at full speed.

I banged on the window harder now. “Ma’am? *Please*. Let us in.”

The car sped up. The *leonte* got closer.

“We’re toast,” said Sam.

“I’m sorry!” I said, jogging alongside the car now, trying to keep up. It was going faster and faster, pulling away from us, leaving me panting in the middle of the road as the *leonte* got within striking distance. I scanned the area for a weapon I could use, but there wasn’t anything, not even a rock I could throw.

The car disappeared over the hill. I’d failed again.

Sam looked at me in despair, then turned to the *leonte* and raised his fists.

Suddenly, the ground began to rumble and a small white meter maid cart zoomed up. It moved so fast, it may as well have dropped straight from the sky.

The *leonte* pulled up short as a man wearing navy shorts and a light blue polo shirt stepped out of the car and raised his hands. “Stop. By the powers of Olympus, I compel you to show mercy to these two.”

The *leonte* roared its displeasure, eyes narrowing.

“Aren’t you one of those people who give parking tickets?” I said.

The man smiled wearily and ran a hand through his thick salt-and-pepper hair. “I almost always let people off with a warning.”

Sam squinted as he examined the vehicle more closely. “Are you a god?”

“My name is Eleos. I’m sort of an...uncle or cousin of the gods. But if it helps, you can think of me as the god of mercy.”

“And you’re going to stop this thing from eating us?”

The man considered me for a moment. His eyes, which had appeared black from a distance, were actually...not there. I suppressed a shudder as I gazed into the empty sockets. “Yes,” he said. “There are great things in store for you—if you live. But this is a one-time deal. Mercy is rare in this world. Most people aren’t lucky enough to meet me at all.”

He once again raised his hands to the *leonte* and I suddenly noticed that they were three times the size they should have been. “Run,” he commanded. “You’ve shown these young people no compassion, and I have none for you.”

The *leonte* growled, baring his teeth and crouching as if to strike.

Eleos took another step forward. “Go,” he said. “Now.”

The *leonte* looked at the hands, glanced at us, growled his annoyance, then high-tailed it for the forest.

Eleos turned to me. He seemed weary again. “Take care with your decisions, young hero,” he said. “You won’t get another chance like this. Now go. The *leonte* will be back soon after I leave.”

“Thanks,” said Sam.

“No problem,” said Eleos, then climbed into his cart and zoomed off.

“Never gonna think about meter maids the same way again,” I muttered.

“We need to go,” said Sam. “Now: Stick to the woods and try to jump the river, or fix the bridge?”

**Select a choice:**

[WOODS](#)

[BRIDGE](#)

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## My Demon Satyr Tea Party

“Food,” Sam gasped. “Need...food.”

I glanced at the diner’s clock and rolled my eyes. “Be patient. We only ordered five minutes ago.”

Sam and I had arrived in Austin, Texas, half an hour earlier. We were tired and hungry. One of us—three guesses who—smelled like a goat. We’d bought a street map of the city and then made a beeline for the nearest restaurant, a tiny place called Xenia. I was dying for a steaming pepperoni pizza, but the menu was limited to BBQ, BBQ, and...more BBQ. When in Austin...

“Did you know that *xenia* is ancient Greek for hospitality?” Sam commented.

To my surprise, I *did*. Though why I knew an ancient Greek word was a mystery to me.

I unfolded the map and smoothed it out on the table. “So this is where we are,” I said, pointing to a small dot. “And I think we need to go here.” I tapped a second, smaller dot marked *Barton Springs Pool*.

Getting to Austin had taken us a while, since instant teleportation was apparently not one of my demigod powers. Instead, we’d taken the bus.

We couldn’t even take a direct route to Austin. Sam insisted we zigzag around.

“To throw other monsters off our trail,” he’d said.

“What other monsters?”

He’d rattled off a long list, complete with colorful descriptions. Each sounded more deadly than the one before it. I’d waved my hands to stop him. “Okay, I get it. Zigzag it is.”

During the bus ride, our only sustenance was stuff we’d scored from vending machines—a bag of chips, a sleeve of cookies, a bottle of soda. I ate the food. Sam wolfed down the wrappers and the plastic bottle.

“Do you always eat trash?” I’d asked, more curious than disgusted.

“You think what’s inside the packaging is any better?”

He had a point. Some of those ingredients sounded as deadly as the monsters.

The rest of our journey was uneventful...mostly. While I was in the restroom at the back of the bus, the hand sanitizer dispenser exploded. At one stop, I put a quarter in a pinball machine and the thing started dinging, flashing, and smoking like it was having a nervous breakdown. (I barely touched it, I swear!) I also had a little misunderstanding with a dog walker and a flower vendor. The less said about that, the better.

Then there was that weird flash of light in the sky, but that was probably just a reflection off a car or something.

Yeah. I'm going with reflection.

Oh, and there was this really weird thing with the sword I'd picked up in the library. Sam kept insisting that we needed to keep it with us for protection. I kept insisting that we were going to end up in jail.

I waved it in Sam's face. "How *exactly* do you travel in public with an enormous bronze sword?" Then *bam!* Instead of a sword, I was holding a fold-up travel toothbrush. I stared at it, then shoved it into my backpack. It didn't make sense, but I was learning that being a demigod meant having to expect the unexpected.

"Here you go, young'uns." Our waitress had a Texas twang, a wide smile, and a name tag that read *B*. She set down our meals—a pile of lettuce for Sam and a BBQ sandwich with a mound of steak fries for me.

She came back with two tall glasses of sweet tea and nodded at our map. "First time in Austin?"

Sam gave a nervous bleat. I remembered then that he'd been in Austin before. He'd implied that things hadn't gone well, but he'd refused to give me any details.

"Yes, ma'am," I answered. "We're trying to get to the Barton Springs Pool."

"That's in Zilker Park. There's a bus that goes there via the Congress Avenue Bridge. Or you could take a taxi, if you've got the money." She eyed our clothes and backpacks as if she doubted that was an option. "Or you could walk. It's not too far." She took a pencil out of her apron pocket and traced a route on our map.

"B!" the cook called from the kitchen. "Order up!"

“Coming, Phil!” The waitress tucked away her pencil. “You kids want anything else, just holler, you hear? By the way, unlimited free refills on drinks!” She trundled off.

Sam stared after her. “This may sound far-fetched, but you remember how I said *xenia* was Greek for hospitality?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, there’s this old story...Zeus and Hermes disguised themselves as humans and visited different people to see who would give them shelter. A bunch of rich folks turned them away. Then they came to an old, poor couple. This couple had nothing, but they welcomed the gods with open arms. As a reward, the gods enchanted the couple’s pitcher so it would never be empty.”

“So?”

“So,” Sam said, “the old woman’s name was *Baucis*. The man’s was *Philemon*.”

It took me a moment to catch on. “You think B is Baucis, and Phil the cook is Philemon?”

I stared at the waitress and the cook. I tried to imagine they were thousands of years old—characters from Greek mythology. I wasn’t good at guessing adults’ ages, but they didn’t look *that* ancient.

“Not all the mythical beings you meet will be evil,” Sam said. “At least, I *hope* not. This place might be a refuge for demigods, in which case we got lucky. Or the names B and Phil could just be a coincidence. Still”—Sam lifted his tea—“unlimited free refills, you know?”

I decided not to argue. Sam forked more lettuce into his mouth. I dug into my sandwich.

“What do you think about getting to Zilker Park?” I asked. “Should we walk?”

Sam picked up a steak fry from the plate in the middle of the table. Ketchup dripped from the tip. He eyed it with distaste.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“It kinda looks like a bloody finger, doesn’t it?” Sam returned the offending potato to the plate.

“Thanks, Sam,” I said. “You’re just full of good cheer.”

“Sorry. Austin freaks me out. The cannibals who live here—”

It was my turn to gag. “Whoa. Back up. Cannibals? As in people who *eat people*?”

I glanced around at the other patrons in the diner. They seemed normal enough. Then again, so had my guidance counselor before she

turned into a lioness and tried to kill me. For all I knew, these Texans were munching on man-burgers with pickles and special sauce.

"No, not human cannibals," Sam clarified. "Demon *satyrs*."

"Oh, that's much better."

"A whole pack of them lives underneath the Congress Avenue Bridge. They attack and eat other satyrs if they get the chance."

The pieces fell into place. "That's why you hate Austin. The last time you were here, they almost made you into shish-ka-Sam."

"Yeah. It happened while I was watching the bats."

"Bats. Right. What?" I shuddered. I have a terrible phobia of rats that almost got us killed when we went to see Mnemosyne. I couldn't imagine having to face *flying* rats.

"There's a huge bat colony—hundreds of thousands of them. They live in the nooks beneath the bridge. People come from all over to watch them fly out at sunset. It's pretty amazing, actually—an enormous fluttering black cloud that covers the sky. And the gossip you can get from that many bats—"

I cut him off, desperately trying not to freak out. "You speak bat?"

He looked at me blankly. "Of course. Anyway, I was so busy watching the bats I didn't see this demon satyr. He snuck up on me from behind a group of camera-toting tourists. Once I noticed him"—he swallowed hard—"I knew I was in big trouble. Red slits for eyes, no pupils. Hot, foul breath, like week-old roadkill rotting in the sun. Fangs and blood-splotched fur. Definitely a meat-eater. And the dude was *huge*. If satyrs were candy bars, he'd be king-size to my fun-size." He rubbed his face with his hands as if to wash away the image. "Honestly, I thought I was a goner."

"What did you do?"

"I ran. And I kept running until..." He paused, embarrassment clouding his face.

"Until what?"

"I tripped, okay? It was humiliating. I mean, I'm a satyr. We're known for being nimble, and there I am, tripping over my own hooves. To make matters worse, I fell into a street vendor's cart." He shook his head in self-disgust. "The vendor was giving out free samples of tea. The little paper cups flew everywhere. Anyone standing nearby got showered."

"What happened to the satyr?"

Sam scratched his head. "I'm not sure. I heard him bellow once. Maybe he was laughing at me. Maybe he was frustrated because I'd



gotten the attention of so many witnesses. When I looked back, he had vanished. I vanished, too. Got the heck out of Austin as soon as I could. That's the closest I've ever come to death. I still have nightmares. I—I swore I'd never come back here."

Guilt washed over me. "But now, thanks to me, you're here again."

Sam reached across the table and grabbed my hand. "Listen carefully, because I'm only going to say this once. I am your *protector*. Where you go, I go. End of story. Got it?"

I held his gaze. "I got it. But that's not the end of the story. You may be my protector, but you're also my best friend. You have my back; I have yours. Okay?"

Sam hesitated, then nodded. "I suppose I can live with that."

"Good. Then here's the plan."

**Select a choice:**

[WALK](#)

[BUS](#)

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“We’re gonna walk. We’ll avoid the Congress Avenue Cannibal Satyr Bridge and follow a different route to the Barton Springs Pool. We’ll get answers from this river god, Barton. Then we’ll get out of Austin. Problem solved.”

I tried to sound confident. Maybe staying away from the bridge would keep Sam safe. Maybe it wouldn’t. How did I know? I was still learning the rules of the demigod world. But right now, my number one rule was making sure Sam didn’t end up as the main course on the demon satyr menu.

Our route to Zilker Park took us through this massive college campus that Sam told me was the University of Texas. For a college campus, it was eerily quiet, but we figured that had something to do with the “Game Day” and “Hook ’em Horns” signs everywhere.

“Must be a football game,” Sam said.

“Or they’ve all gone fishing...”

Since it was about a million degrees outside, we stopped to rest at a three-tiered fountain with a big bronze statue in the middle. A winged lady in flowing robes held aloft a burning torch in one hand and a bunch of laurel leaves in the other. She stood in a chariot drawn by three fish-tailed horses. Bronze pointy-eared dudes rode the horses bareback. (Actually, just about everything about the dudes was bare.)

“Let me guess,” I said. “More Greek stuff?”

Sam shrugged. “Sort of. This is the Littlefield Fountain. Those half-horse, half-fish creatures are hippocampi. They’re pretty friendly.”

I tried to wrap my mind around the fact that half-horse, half-fish creatures could be real, much less friendly. “And the woman there is a goddess?”

Sam seesawed his hand. “Technically, no. She’s Columbia. She was the symbol of American independence until ol’ Libertas planted herself in New York Harbor.”

Right behind me, I heard an indignant *hrumph*. I turned, but no one was there. Sam and I were alone by the fountain. Sam didn’t look like he’d heard anything. I decided I must’ve imagined it.

“Libertas,” I said. “Uh, you mean the Statue of Liberty?”

“Yeah. Little known fact: the Statue of Liberty doesn’t *represent* the Roman goddess of liberty. She *is* the Roman goddess of liberty.”

I blinked. “Wait, you mean—”

“Yep.”

“—that huge green statue is a living, breathing—”

“Well, I don’t know about breathing. But living? Yeah. Green Girl is an actual goddess. Got herself an island right outside the most powerful city in America, where she can keep an eye on things. After that happened, the old symbol of liberty, Columbia, kind of faded from the scene.”

I looked at the bronze plaque affixed to the fountain. “*Brevis a natura nobis*. That’s Latin, right?”

Sam nodded. “Can you translate it?” His tone was casual, but his expression was intense, as if my answer mattered.

“I don’t have to. It’s written in English right here: *A short life hath been given by Nature unto man*,” I recited. “*But the remembrance of a life laid down in a good cause endureth forever*.”

“Mmm.” Sam focused on clouds. “I wouldn’t mind my life being remembered forever. Dying for a good cause.”

“Yeah,” I replied. “But in the meantime, if we could avoid making our short lives even shorter—”

“That would be good,” he agreed.

I studied the bronze face of Columbia, the retired not-quite-goddess of liberty. I had a feeling there was something important about the statue...something I wasn’t quite getting, but I decided it was time to keep moving.

When we finally arrived at Zilker Park, we wove through hordes of sunbathers and picnickers to get to the central attraction. Barton Springs Pool was gigantic—a thousand feet long and about one hundred fifty feet wide. According to one sign, it was more than eighteen feet deep in some places. Concrete walkways stretched the pool’s length, with stairs leading into the water, but the bottom of the pool looked more like a riverbed, with mossy rocks and even some fish swimming around. The whole area was surrounded by grassy slopes and shade trees.

Seeing all that sparkling clear water reminded me of how grubby I felt.

When Sam produced two swimsuits from his backpack, I could have kissed him. (FYI, I didn’t.)

“If you want to meet a god,” Sam said, “you’ve gotta swim where the gods are.”

Five minutes later we were splashing in the pool. The water felt so wonderful that for a moment I forgot everything else. Then reality bit me on the butt.

“See Barton anywhere?” Sam asked.

“What’s he look like?”

“Sort of...godly.”

“Oh, that’s helpful.”

But the next second, I spotted a guy who did, in fact, look godly. Lounging at the water’s edge was a muscular, tanned twenty-something man with slick black hair, aviator sunglasses, and a teeny Speedo that seemed molded to his body. His skin positively glowed in the sunlight. While Sam was underwater, having what looked like an intense conversation with a guppy, I waded over to the sunbather guy.

“Hi, um, are you a god?”

The man smiled smugly. “I’ve been told so many times.”

“Great. Listen, if you could just tell me about my mom or dad, I’ll be on my way.”

The river god yawned, then tilted his perfect face to the sun liked he’d already forgotten about me.

Okay, I thought, now what?

Then I remembered the respectful way Sam had addressed Mnemosyne. Maybe that’s what I needed to do to get Barton’s attention.

I bowed. “O mighty one, I—I beg you to answer my query. I plead with you to bestow upon me the information I seek. I beseech you to—”

“Kid,” the god interrupted, “I don’t know nothing about your mom or dad. Now beat it. You’re blocking the sun.”

“But—but—”

“Hey, Zane!” Sam called.

Sam had surfaced on the opposite side of the pool. He was now standing in the shallows with a guy who looked like an aging hippie. Sam beckoned to me with a mortified expression, like *What are you doing? Get over here!*

I swam over.

The hippie was chuckling and shaking his head. “Did you just *beseech* that guy? ‘O mighty one’? Who talks like that?” His voice was low and rumbling, like boulders rolling in a deep current.

“Who—? Wait.” I looked at Sam. “Why did you call me over? Who is this old guy?”

Sam winced. “Zane, Speedo-man over there isn’t Barton.” He jerked his thumb at the hippie. “This is.”

My throat felt like several guppies were wriggling around in it.

The river god was...underwhelming. His hair hung in two skinny gray braids under a battered black cowboy hat. His crooked teeth were about as mossy as the bottom of the pool. His tie-dyed KEEP AUSTIN WEIRD T-shirt barely covered his potbelly, and his baggy green shorts were decorated with tiny pictures of aquatic creatures.

"Um..." I tried to swallow. "You're Barton?"

"Actually, it's *Brykhon*," the river god corrected. "Son of the Titan Oceanus. Ally of the Giants in the war against the gods. Picked the wrong side, as it turns out, but that's all water under the bridge." He smiled at me. "Howdy, hero! You and your friend come with me so we can have us a private chat."

He dissolved into the water, then reappeared at the base of an oak tree near the far end of the pool. Normally I wouldn't follow a stranger, especially not one who dissolved into liquid, but Sam said, "Come on, let's go!"

I figured Barton/Brykhon couldn't be too bad, what with the smile and the potbelly and the little aquatic creatures on his shorts.

Sam and I swam after him. Brykhon had made himself comfortable between the roots of the tree, dangling his feet in the water. "Hot today, eh?"

Then he took off his hat and I just about leaped out of my swimsuit. "Yikes!"

Two pointed horns sprouted from his thinning gray hair.

"Relax," Sam said. "He's a *potamus*, a river god. Check out his lower half."

My eyes widened. I was sure I'd seen human legs a moment before, but now Brykhon's lower half was all fish—a scaly trunk with a huge green tail fin flopping around in the pool.

"How—" I faltered. "You weren't a merman a second ago, were you?"

"It's the Mist, little hero." Brykhon gave me another mossy grin. "There's a magical veil that disguises the true appearance of gods and monsters and stuff. Now that you're starting to accept the fact that you're a demigod, you'll be able to see through it more and more often. Most of the time, anyway."

"But—"

Brykhon suddenly lunged toward the water and snatched up a half-empty bag of Doritos that was floating by.

“Humans,” Brykhon said with disgust. “They’ve made such a mess of my water. See these little pictures on my shorts?”

“Um, you don’t have shorts anymore. You turned into a fish person.”

Brykhon frowned. “Oh, right. Well, if you *could* see them, you’d see the Barton Springs salamander. Endangered species! My spring is the only place in the world where they live. Used to be tons of them. Now...?”

He made a strange burbling sound. A tiny speckled salamander leaped out of the water and into his hand. “Now, because of pollution, the species is nearly extinct. I do what I can to save them, but...” He shook his head wearily. The salamander skittered off into the water.

We were all quiet for a moment. I felt bad about being part of a species that killed endangered salamanders with Nacho-flavored Doritos, but I wasn’t sure what to say.

Finally Brykhon sighed. “Enough about that. I’m guessing Mnemosyne sent you here to learn about your parentage, not about my salamander.”

A thrill shot up my spine. This was the moment of truth! I was about to discover the facts about my birth—what powers I might have, what my future might hold, what my destiny—

“I’m afraid the old girl steered you in the wrong direction,” said Brykhon.

Know that sound a car makes when it comes to a screeching halt? That’s what I heard in my head.

Sam bleated in protest. “What do you mean? Mnemosyne said you had answers!”

Brykhon arched his eyebrows. “Did she? What exactly did she say?”

The goddess’s words came back to me. “*Go to Austin,*” I repeated. “*Seek out the river god Barton.*”

The god inspected his grimy fingernails. “Nothing about me telling you about your godly parent?”

Sam and I exchanged looks.

“Well, no,” I admitted. “But if you don’t have the answers, why’d we come to Austin in the first place?”

“Because Austin is the hiding place of a powerful magic item,” Brykhon said. “And I know where it is. Long ago, the gods decreed that only the next great hero could obtain this item. Succeed in retrieving it, and you’ll receive a clue to your parentage.” He turned his gaze to Sam. “Unfortunately, getting the item involves risk to *you*, my satyr friend.”

Sam turned white. “Oh, no.”



“Oh, yes.” Brykhon nodded grimly. “The item lies in the lair of the demon satyrs. And they’re not likely to give it up without a fight.”

Sam and I made our way back to the Littlefield Fountain, our damp swimsuits and the bag of Dorito dust (“I might get hungry later,” Sam said defensively) stowed in his backpack. Brykhon hadn’t offered any clues about how to defeat the demon satyrs. He wouldn’t even tell us exactly what this mysterious magic item was. He claimed not to know. I wasn’t sure I believed him, but what I believed didn’t matter. We were on our own.

“Let’s think this through,” I said. “What do we know about the demon satyrs?”

“Well,” Sam mused, “they’re demons. And they’re satyrs. Oh, and they eat other satyrs, did I mention that?”

I began pacing. “What else do you remember from the time you saw one?”

“You mean besides abject terror?”

I stared at him, thinking hard. “You said the demon satyr bellowed and then vanished after you collided with a street vendor. Sam, what was that guy selling?”

“Sweet tea. It splashed everywhere, and...” Sam’s eyes widened. “You think the tea did something to—”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But if it did—”

“What are we waiting for?” Sam shot to his hooves. “Let’s get some tea and waste some demons!”

“Sam, hold up! We can’t just waltz in and start emptying tea bottles on them.”

“Why not?”

“What if it doesn’t work? You really want to be surrounded by a pack of wet, angry cannibal satyrs?”

He sat down with a thud. “Well, when you put it that way...”

“We don’t know for sure whether the tea killed the demon satyr or just scared it away or—”

“I know,” trilled a female voice behind me.

I whirled, but no one was there.

“Yoo-hoo! Up here, silly.” The statue of Columbia waved her frond at me. Her bronze face creaked as she smiled. “Hello!”

I resisted the urge to run away screaming. “Um, hi?”

Sam rose to his hooves again. He bowed deeply to the statue. "Goddess, forgive us for not acknowledging you sooner!"

"You said she wasn't a goddess," I whispered.

He elbowed me. "Just follow my lead, will you?" He straightened and folded his hands over his heart, "Please, Goddess, I beseech you to share your wisdom!"

"Oh, so it's okay for *you* to use *beseech*?" I muttered under my breath. But I figured I'd better go along with it. I bowed. "Yeah, um, I beseech you, too."

A couple of students passed by, but they didn't seem to notice the living statue. They just smirked at Sam and me and kept walking. Maybe Austin had a lot of crazy people who talked to statues.

"Sam Greenwood." Columbia said his name like it was the most beautiful phrase in the world. "It is so good to see you again. I remember your first visit to Austin well!"

"Um, you do?" Sam asked.

"Of course! I was out for a quick fly with the bats that night."

"You...fly with the bats?" I asked. "Never mind. Of course you do."

"Yes!" said the statue. "That wingless old biddy Libertas can't fly, you know. Hmph! At any rate, I was circling over the Congress Avenue Bridge when I saw the handsomest satyr—I mean you, of course—being chased by one of those bloodthirsty Aethiopian satyrs!"

"A what now?" I asked.

"That's the technical term for them," Sam said. "Now ssshhh. Please, great goddess, go on!"

"Well, of course I would have intervened, but I didn't have time!" Columbia said. "The demonic beast had his mouth wide open, ready to take a bite out of your cute little furry behind when you bravely tripped over that vendor's cart, and the monster got a big mouthful of tea. Poof! Bye-bye, demon!" She waved her frond again. "I was delighted to see him destroyed. One less evil goat-man to sully the waters of my fountain. One much more adorable satyr to visit me." She fluttered her eyelids and giggled.

"Dude," I whispered, trying not to laugh. "She likes you."

"She does not!" Sam blushed to the tips of his horns. "Listen, Columbia just gave us the break we need. Sweet tea vaporizes Aethiopian satyrs! Now all we have to do is get some and waste them!"

Columbia cleared her bronze throat. "Ah, but they must *drink* it, my very handsome goat-man. Dousing them with tea is not enough."

“Then we get squirt guns,” Sam said confidently. He pretended to shoot. “Pew! Pew! Pew! Right between their lips!”

“No good,” I said. “You’d have to be a perfect shot, and then they’d have to swallow the tea. Besides, you said there was a whole colony of these things. Even if you dissolved one or two satyrs, the others would figure out what was up. They’d just keep their mouths shut and slaughter us.”

Sam lowered his finger gun. “So...what do we do?”

I reached into my left front pocket and removed the gift I’d gotten from Mnemosyne. “Maybe this can help us?” I said.

“Do you know what it does?” asked Sam.

“Not a clue,” I said, then raised the library card and swiped it in the air like a credit card.

Nothing happened.

I sort of waved it around. “Alakazam.”

Zip.

“Is there anything written on it?” asked Sam.

I examined it again. “Nothing helpful.”

Sam shrugged. “Maybe we’re not supposed to use it yet.”

“Maybe not.” I shoved the card back into my pocket, then turned to Columbia.

“Goddess, what did you mean about the evil goat-men sullyng your waters? Do they come here to drink?”

“To drink. To bathe. To scrub their nasty feet! Every night when the bats fly. Same bat-time, same bat-channel.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I stared at the water gushing from the fountain, splashing over the snouts of the bronze horses.

“Why here?” I asked. “Don’t they live under a bridge next to a river? Why not bathe and drink there?”

Sam shuddered. “You don’t want to drink from that river, Zane.”

“No, indeed,” Columbia agreed. “This water is pure and sanctified by my presence. Also, it’s fluorinated to prevent cavities.”

I snapped my fingers. “That’s the answer, then!”

“Fluorination?” asked Sam.

“No! We mix iced tea into the fountain water!”

Sam glanced nervously at the bronze horses. “I don’t know if the hippocampi will go for that. They already look pretty angry to me.”

“Oh, don’t worry about my horses,” Columbia said. “Your idea has merit! A few gallons of sweet tea should do it, if they are dumped in just before sunset.”

I bowed again to Columbia. “So we have your permission, O Goddess?”

“On one condition. If you ever get to New York City, promise to go to the Statue of Liberty and yell *Columbia Rules!* as loud as you can. She hates that.”

I was a little concerned about what Libertas might do to me, but I nodded. “Promise. Once the satyrs are destroyed, they’ll never sully your waters again. Then Sam and I can find the magic item we need from their lair.”

Sam rubbed his hands together. “Great. Now, where should we get that tea?”

I grinned. “I happen to know a place that offers free refills.”

“The Xenia Diner? You think B will help us?”

“Worth a shot!”

“I hope this works,” Sam whispered.

It was almost sunset. The area around the fountain had cleared out. I guess most of the UT students were back in their dorms. Armed with a pitcher provided by B and Phil, we began pouring sweet iced tea into the fountain. Sure enough, no matter how long we poured, the pitcher never went empty. We could easily have overflowed the fountain, but then the bronze hippocampi gave a snort, which was our warning signal.

I stirred the water with my hand, hoping the demon satyrs wouldn’t notice the ice cubes floating around the horses’ hooves. Then Sam and I hunkered down behind a bench to wait.

“Let’s go over the plan again,” I whispered. “One: demon satyrs drink from the fountain. Two: we make sure they all get vaporized. Three: we head to the bridge to find the magic item. Four...”

My voice trailed off. Sam bit his lip. Neither of us knew what would happen at step four. Hopefully there wouldn’t be any satyrs left back at demon satyr headquarters. Hopefully we’d find the magic item, and it would give me some answers.

“When we get to the bridge,” Sam said, “be sure to stick close to me. There could be hundreds of people there. We don’t want to get separated.”

Warning bells went off in my head. “Sam...if there’s a crowd of mortals like that at the bridge every night, how did the demon satyr zero in on you?”

“He probably smelled me. Monsters can smell satyrs, and demigods, and—”

“Sam, if the demon satyr could smell you in a huge crowd, won’t they pick up your scent here tonight?”

Sam’s eyes widened with panic. “I didn’t think—it never occurred to me—*blah-ah-ah! Blah-ah-ah!*” He bleated in terror.

“We’ve got to get out of here!”

“Too late!” he moaned. “Look!”

In the growing gloom, a dozen shadowy figures crept toward the fountain. They walked hunched over, sort of like gorillas, except gorillas didn’t have cloven feet—or glowing red eyes. The biggest demon satyr straightened and sniffed the air. His head swiveled in our direction, his slitted ruby eyes searching the dark.

Next to me, Sam shivered. “All my fault,” he whimpered, his tone anguished. “I should’ve known.” He tensed, ready to flee.

“Don’t move,” I hissed. “You run and they’ll get you!”

Sam stayed put, but I could sense his terror growing.

Another demon lifted its head and sniffed.

Sam looked at me, eyes wide. “If we don’t run,” he whispered, “you’ll have to either fight them or outsmart them.”

Do you have any ideas?”

“None,” whispered Sam. “Zero. And you gotta decide *now*.”

I peeked over the bench and saw the hulking monsters all raising their heads now, all sniffing the air. Time was up.

I went with my gut.

**Select a choice:**

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[OUTSMART](#)

*WARNING! You're about to spoil a great story by not making a choice!  
Page back, then click one of the links to advance the story. Otherwise,  
the next section may not make any sense to you.*

“We take the bus.” I held up my hand to stop him before he protested. “The bus goes *over* the bridge, and we’ll be surrounded by other people at all times. Plus, we don’t know if there are more demon satyrs in Austin, and I really don’t want to accidentally stumble on another lair. This way, we get in and out as fast as possible.”

I tried to sound confident. Sam had been on edge since we reached Texas and right now, my number one rule was making sure he didn’t end up as the main course on the demon satyr menu. Getting this done quickly was our best shot, and staying off the streets was a welcome bonus.

B was kind enough to give us directions to the closest bus stop, only a few blocks away. As we huddled under the too-small awning, fighting for every inch of shade, we watched the traffic start to pick up, the cars all decked out in orange and white—streamers, flags, bumper stickers...

Eventually, a dark-windowed charter bus pulled up with a giant “Greek Week” banner hanging on its side. The doors slid open and we were hit with a wave of rock music and air conditioning as two guys peeked out. One was tall and clean-cut, wearing a white T-shirt with orange Greek letters on it and a battered Longhorns baseball cap. The other guy’s face was covered in stubble, matching his disheveled hair, glassy eyes, and noticeable lack of shoes. His bare chest was painted with a giant white “X.”

“This them?” Baseball Hat asked. I felt a pang of jealousy—with that dimpled smirk and southern drawl, he’d clearly never had a problem talking to girls.

“I don’t remember, man. We just swore ’em in.” Dirty Guy slurped from a red Solo cup. “Ask ’em a pledge question.”

Baseball Hat cleared his throat. “What’s the first letter of the Greek alphabet?”

I paused, because the question seemed too easy. “Um...alpha?”

“Alriiiight! It’s them, man!” Dirty Guy downed his cup and gestured for us to get on the bus. He stared at Sam for a beat before throwing his right arm in the air and making a Y-shape with his fingers. “HOOK ’EM HORNS!!!”

I turned my body to talk semi-privately with Sam. “Is that, like, a secret satyr sign?”



Sam looked concerned. “I’ve never seen that in my life. I don’t think this is the right bus.”

“Of course it’s not the ‘right’ bus. But maybe it’s a *better* bus—a gift from the gods?” I gestured at the bus, the shirts. “I mean, they’re wearing Greek letters. The bus says ‘Greek Week.’ It’s *air conditioned*. And they’ve got water.” I gestured at the now-crumpled cup that Dirty Guy had tossed on the ground.

Sam sighed and shrugged.

“What’s your name?” Sam asked Baseball Hat as I climbed on board.

“I am Bacchus. God of partying.” He gestured expansively as he turned toward the back of the bus. “Welcome to my bach-a-nel.”

Sam tugged frantically at the back of my shirt. “Bacchus is *Roman*!” But the doors were shut and the bus was already moving.

Fifteen minutes later, Sam and I had found seats deep in the heart of another planet. A planet apparently called Delta Sigma Lambda Eta Beta, or something like that.

A girl in cutoff shorts and a white tank top tied at the waist sidled up to Sam. “You’re cute,” she giggled, reaching out to run her fingers through his hair.

I was worried that she would touch his horns, but Sam ducked out of the way before she made contact. He was reaching for yet another plastic cup to stash in his bag, presumably for a later snack.

Dirty Guy lunged toward us, tripping over two of his friends. He leveled his gaze. “So, which one of you’s gonna be the ‘T’?”

“The tea?” I gulped, thinking about cannibals and sweet tea and wondering what we’d gotten ourselves into.

“Yeah. We got the rest.” He whistled. “Guys!”

Three other dudes wearing orange and white facepaint scrambled into a line. They pulled on orange clown wigs as I read the letters painted on their bare chests. “AXES...? Oh, you need the ‘T’ for Texas.”

“HOOK ’EM HORNS!!!!” They all started whooping and yelling again.

Sam refocused after stuffing a few more cups into his backpack. “Oh, no. We can’t go to the game.”

Dead silence, as four sets of eyes narrowed at us.

Dirty Guy kept his gaze locked on Sam as he asked Letter A, “Did that pledge just say ‘no’?”

Letter A shook his head in disappointment. “We thought you were our *brothers*.”

“Well, actually, I’m a sat—”

I kicked Sam to shut him up.

“We, um...we’re going to Zilker Park.” I fumbled for an idea. “The Rho Rho Rho House is having a, um, tailgate party. It’s going to be, you know, epic.”

“Yeah. We’re supposed to go and stake out a spot for after the game,” said Sam, catching on.

“Rho Rho Rho?” Letter S asked, blinking.

“Yeah, it’s a new sorority,” I blundered on. “Just your types.”

“It’s our, er, pledge class gift to, um, thank the brothers for welcoming us....”

We must have done a decent sales job, or else there was something other than water in those cups. Regardless, they happily dropped us off at Zilker Park with plans to meet up after the game.

When we finally arrived at Zilker Park, we wove through hordes of sunbathers and picnickers to get to the central attraction. Barton Springs Pool was gigantic—a thousand feet long and about one hundred fifty feet wide. According to one sign, it was more than eighteen feet deep in some places. Concrete walkways stretched the pool’s length, with stairs leading into the water, but the bottom of the pool looked more like a riverbed, with mossy rocks and even some fish swimming around. The whole area was surrounded by grassy slopes and shade trees.

Seeing all that sparkling clear water reminded me of how grubby I felt.

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“Sort of...godly.”

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But the next second, I spotted a guy who did, in fact, look godly. Lounging at the water's edge was a muscular, tanned twenty-something man with slick black hair, aviator sunglasses, and a teeny Speedo that seemed molded to his body. His skin positively glowed in the sunlight. While Sam was underwater, having what looked like an intense conversation with a guppy, I waded over to the sunbather guy.

"Hi, um, are you a god?"

The man smiled smugly. "I've been told so many times."

"Great. Listen, if you could just tell me about my mom or dad, I'll be on my way."

The river god yawned, then tilted his perfect face to the sun liked he'd already forgotten about me.

Okay, I thought, now what?

Then I remembered the respectful way Sam had addressed Mnemosyne. Maybe that's what I needed to do to get Barton's attention.

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“Well, no,” I admitted. “But if you don’t have the answers, why’d we come to Austin in the first place?”

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Sam turned white. “Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes.” Brykhon nodded grimly. “The item lies in the lair of the demon satyrs. And they’re not likely to give it up without a fight.”

Sam and I made our way to a three-tiered fountain with a big bronze statue in the middle, our damp swimsuits and the bag of Dorito dust (“I might get hungry later,” Sam said defensively) stowed in his backpack. Brykhon hadn’t offered any clues about how to defeat the demon satyrs. He wouldn’t even tell us exactly what this mysterious magic item was.

He claimed not to know. I wasn't sure I believed him, but what I believed didn't matter. We were on our own.

We sat heavily on the edge of the fountain and gazed up at a winged lady in flowing robes. The statue held aloft a burning torch in one hand and a bunch of laurel leaves in the other. She stood in a chariot drawn by three fish-tailed horses. Bronze pointy-eared dudes rode the horses bareback. (Actually, just about everything about the dudes was bare.)

"Let me guess," I said. "More Greek stuff?"

Sam shrugged. "Sort of. This is the Littlefield Fountain. Those half-horse, half-fish creatures are hippocampi. They're pretty friendly."

I tried to wrap my mind around the fact that half-horse, half-fish creatures could be real, much less friendly. "And the woman there is a goddess?"

Sam seesawed his hand. "Technically, no. She's Columbia. She was the symbol of American independence until ol' Libertas planted herself in New York Harbor."

Right behind me, I heard an indignant *hrumph*. I turned, but no one was there. Sam and I were alone by the fountain. Sam didn't look like he'd heard anything. I decided I must've imagined it.

"Libertas," I said. "Uh, you mean the Statue of Liberty?"

"Yeah. Little known fact: the Statue of Liberty doesn't *represent* the Roman goddess of liberty. She *is* the Roman goddess of liberty."

I blinked. "Wait, you mean—"

"Yep."

"—that huge green statue is a living, breathing—"

"Well, I don't know about breathing. But living? Yeah. Green Girl is an actual goddess. Got herself an island right outside the most powerful city in America, where she can keep an eye on things. After that happened, the old symbol of liberty, Columbia, kind of faded from the scene."

I looked at the bronze plaque affixed to the fountain. "*Brevis a natura nobis*. That's Latin, right?"

Sam nodded. "Can you translate it?" His tone was casual, but his expression was intense, as if my answer mattered.

"I don't have to. It's written in English right here: *A short life hath been given by Nature unto man,*" I recited. "*But the remembrance of a life laid down in a good cause endureth forever.*"

"Mmm." Sam focused on clouds. "I wouldn't mind my life being remembered forever. Dying for a good cause."

“Yeah,” I replied. “But in the meantime, if we could avoid making our short lives even shorter—”

“Oh, I’m with you,” said Sam.

“Let’s think this through,” I said. “What do we know about the demon satyrs?”

“Well,” Sam mused, “they’re demons. And they’re satyrs. Oh, and they eat other satyrs, did I mention that?”

I began pacing. “What else do you remember from the time you saw one?”

“You mean besides abject terror?”

I stared at him, thinking hard. “You said the demon satyr bellowed and then vanished after you collided with a street vendor. Sam, what was that guy selling?”

“Sweet tea. It splashed everywhere, and...” Sam’s eyes widened. “You think the tea did something to—”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But if it did—”

“What are we waiting for?” Sam shot to his hooves. “Let’s get some tea and waste some demons!”

“Sam, hold up! We can’t just waltz in and start emptying tea bottles on them.”

“Why not?”

“What if it doesn’t work? You really want to be surrounded by a pack of wet, angry cannibal satyrs?”

He sat down with a thud. “Well, when you put it that way...”

“We don’t know for sure whether the tea killed the demon satyr or just scared it away or—”

“I know,” trilled a female voice behind me.

I whirled, but no one was there.

“Yoo-hoo! Up here, silly.” The statue of Columbia waved her frond at me. Her bronze face creaked as she smiled. “Hello!”

I resisted the urge to run away screaming. “Um, hi?”

Sam rose to his hooves again. He bowed deeply to the statue. “Goddess, forgive us for not acknowledging you sooner!”

“You said she wasn’t a goddess,” I whispered.

He elbowed me. “Just follow my lead, will you?” He straightened and folded his hands over his heart, “Please, Goddess, I beseech you to share your wisdom!”

“Oh, so it’s okay for *you* to use *beseech*?” I muttered under my breath. But I figured I’d better go along with it. I bowed. “Yeah, um, I beseech you, too.”

A couple of students passed by, but they didn't seem to notice the living statue. They just smirked at Sam and me and kept walking. Maybe Austin had a lot of crazy people who talked to statues.

"Sam Greenwood." Columbia said his name like it was the most beautiful phrase in the world. "It is so good to see you again. I remember your first visit to Austin well!"

"Um, you do?" Sam asked.

"Of course! I was out for a quick fly with the bats that night."

"You...fly with the bats?" I asked. "Never mind. Of course you do."

"Yes!" said the statue. "That wingless old biddy Libertas can't fly, you know. Hmph! At any rate, I was circling over the Congress Avenue Bridge when I saw the handsomest satyr—I mean you, of course—being chased by one of those bloodthirsty Aethiopian satyrs!"

"A what now?" I asked.

"That's the technical term for them," Sam said. "Now ssshhh. Please, great goddess, go on!"

"Well, of course I would have intervened, but I didn't have time!" Columbia said. "The demonic beast had his mouth wide open, ready to take a bite out of your cute little furry behind when you bravely tripped over that vendor's cart, and the monster got a big mouthful of tea. Poof! Bye-bye, demon!" She waved her frond again. "I was delighted to see him destroyed. One less evil goat-man to sully the waters of my fountain. One much more adorable satyr to visit me." She fluttered her eyelids and giggled.

"Dude," I whispered, trying not to laugh. "She likes you."

"She does not!" Sam blushed to the tips of his horns. "Listen, Columbia just gave us the break we need. Sweet tea vaporizes Aethiopian satyrs! Now all we have to do is get some and waste them!"

Columbia cleared her bronze throat. "Ah, but they must *drink* it, my very handsome goat-man. Dousing them with tea is not enough."

"Then we get squirt guns," Sam said confidently. He pretended to shoot. "Pew! Pew! Pew! Right between their lips!"

"No good," I said. "You'd have to be a perfect shot, and then they'd have to swallow the tea. Besides, you said there was a whole colony of these things. Even if you dissolved one or two satyrs, the others would figure out what was up. They'd just keep their mouths shut and slaughter us."

Sam lowered his finger gun. "So...what do we do?"

I reached into my left front pocket and removed the gift I'd gotten from Mnemosyne. "Maybe this can help us?" I said.



“Do you know what it does?” asked Sam.

“Not a clue,” I said, then raised the library card and swiped it in the air like a credit card.

Nothing happened.

I sort of waved it around. “Alakazam.”

Zip.

“Is there anything written on it?” asked Sam.

I examined it again. “Nothing helpful.”

Sam shrugged. “Maybe we’re not supposed to use it yet.”

“Maybe not.” I shoved the card back into my pocket, then turned to Columbia.

“Goddess, what did you mean about the evil goat-men sully your waters? Do they come here to drink?”

“To drink. To bathe. To scrub their nasty feet! Every night when the bats fly. Same bat-time, same bat-channel.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I stared at the water gushing from the fountain, splashing over the snouts of the bronze horses.

“Why here?” I asked. “Don’t they live under a bridge next to a river? Why not bathe and drink there?”

Sam shuddered. “You don’t want to drink from that river, Zane.”

“No, indeed,” Columbia agreed. “This water is pure and sanctified by my presence. Also, it’s fluorinated to prevent cavities.”

I snapped my fingers. “That’s the answer, then!”

“Fluorination?” asked Sam.

“No! We mix iced tea into the fountain water!”

Sam glanced nervously at the bronze horses. “I don’t know if the hippocampi will go for that. They already look pretty angry to me.”

“Oh, don’t worry about my horses,” Columbia said. “Your idea has merit! A few gallons of sweet tea should do it, if they are dumped in just before sunset.”

I bowed again to Columbia. “So we have your permission, O Goddess?”

“On one condition. If you ever get to New York City, promise to go to the Statue of Liberty and yell *Columbia Rules!* as loud as you can. She hates that.”

I was a little concerned about what Libertas might do to me, but I nodded. “Promise. Once the satyrs are destroyed, they’ll never sully your waters again. Then Sam and I can find the magic item we need from their lair.”

Sam rubbed his hands together. “Great. Now, where should we get that tea?”

I grinned. “I happen to know a place that offers free refills.”

“The Xenia Diner? You think B will help us?”

“Worth a shot!”

“I hope this works,” Sam whispered.

It was almost sunset. The area around the fountain had cleared out. I guess most of the UT students were back in their dorms. Armed with a pitcher provided by B and Phil, we began pouring sweet iced tea into the fountain. Sure enough, no matter how long we poured, the pitcher never went empty. We could easily have overflowed the fountain, but then the bronze hippocampi gave a snort, which was our warning signal.

I stirred the water with my hand, hoping the demon satyrs wouldn’t notice the ice cubes floating around the horses’ hooves. Then Sam and I hunkered down behind a bench to wait.

“Let’s go over the plan again,” I whispered. “One: demon satyrs drink from the fountain. Two: we make sure they all get vaporized. Three: we head to the bridge to find the magic item. Four...”

My voice trailed off. Sam bit his lip. Neither of us knew what would happen at step four. Hopefully there wouldn’t be any satyrs left back at demon satyr headquarters. Hopefully we’d find the magic item, and it would give me some answers.

“When we get to the bridge,” Sam said, “be sure to stick close to me. There could be hundreds of people there. We don’t want to get separated.”

Warning bells went off in my head. “Sam...if there’s a crowd of mortals like that at the bridge every night, how did the demon satyr zero in on you?”

“He probably smelled me. Monsters can smell satyrs, and demigods, and—”

“Sam, if the demon satyr could smell you in a huge crowd, won’t they pick up your scent here tonight?”

Sam’s eyes widened with panic. “I didn’t think—it never occurred to me—*blah-ah-ah! Blah-ah-ah!*” He bleated in terror.

“We’ve got to get out of here!”

“Too late!” he moaned. “Look!”

In the growing gloom, a dozen shadowy figures crept toward the fountain. They walked hunched over, sort of like gorillas, except gorillas

didn't have cloven feet—or glowing red eyes. The biggest demon satyr straightened and sniffed the air. His head swiveled in our direction, his slitted ruby eyes searching the dark.

Next to me, Sam shivered. “All my fault,” he whimpered, his tone anguished. “I should’ve known.” He tensed, ready to flee.

“Don’t move,” I hissed. “You run and they’ll get you!”

Sam stayed put, but I could sense his terror growing.

Another demon lifted its head and sniffed.

Sam looked at me, eyes wide. “If we don’t run,” he whispered, “you’ll have to either fight them or outsmart them.”

Do you have any ideas?”

“None,” whispered Sam. “Zero. And you gotta decide *now*.”

I peeked over the bench and saw the hulking monsters all raising their heads now, all sniffing the air. Time was up.

I went with my gut.

**Select a choice:**

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Suddenly, an idea came to me. As quietly as I could, I grabbed Sam's backpack and fumbled inside until I found what I was looking for—the bag of Dorito dust.

“Zane?” Sam asked. “You’re going to have a snack *now*?”

Ignoring his question, I shoved the toothbrush and the library card into Sam's backpack, not wanting to get them wet. I opened the foil bag and dumped the contents over my head.

“Here’s hoping they like the smell of nacho-flavored demigod more than original-flavored satyr.” Before Sam could stop me, I strode to the fountain.

“OH, WHAT A BEAUTIFUL EVENING!” I said loudly.

The satyr leader turned and snarled at me. His eyes narrowed. His nostrils flared.

At that moment, I detected the flaw in my plan. Namely, the plan didn't include an escape route. Nevertheless, I had to throw these things off Sam's scent and still find a way to make them drink the tea.

I stumbled to the edge of the fountain. “Hello, boys!” I yelled at the satyrs. “Wanna drink from this fountain? Can't! It's mine now! My fountain!”

I jumped in and splashed around like an idiot. “Ha, ha! Can't drink from my fountain! Nossir! I claim it in the name of...Dorito-flavored demigods everywhere.”

The lead demon gave three short bleats. The pack rushed me.

At that point, I was pretty sure I would die. I only hoped I could somehow splash enough tea in the monsters' mouths to take a few of them with me. Maybe, with luck, Sam could get away. He was my only friend. I couldn't let him get turned into goat-meat tacos by a band of bridge-dwelling cannibals.

But Sam had other ideas. “Zane!” he yelled. “Catch!”

Sam popped out from behind the bench and threw something small and white. I snatched the toothbrush out of the air.

For a split second, I thought Sam really needed to get over the whole fluoride thing. This was no time for dental hygiene. Then I remembered that this was no ordinary toothbrush.

I stroked the bristles with my thumb and the toothbrush sprang into sword form, the bright blue gem gleaming on the hilt.

“How do you like me now?” I yelled at the demons.

The leader hissed. Then, as one, the satyr pack veered toward Sam.

“Hey, no!” I screamed. “Over here! Fountain water! Dorito flavoring!”

“I’ve got you, adorable goat man!” cried Columbia.

With a powerful beat of her wings, the bronze goddess swooped from her chariot, scooped up Sam in her arms, and flew to the nearest treetop.

The demons stopped, bleating with fury.

“There, there. You’re safe now,” Columbia crooned, cuddling Sam like a baby. “As for you nasty cannibal goat-men, this one is mine! You’ll have to settle for eating demigod.”

*Thanks a lot*, I thought.

A dozen sets of glowing red eyes locked on me.

“That’s right!” I said, waving my sword. “Kill me and eat me if you must, but do not drink from my fountain! DO NOT!”

I tried my best to act terrified. It wasn’t hard. I climbed the slippery tiers of the fountain until I stood in Columbia’s chariot, distancing myself as far from the satyrs as possible.

“That would pain me too much!” I yelled. “If I had to watch you filthy demons drink from these pure waters before you killed me, that would be too horrible! I simply couldn’t. I would cry. Like, a lot!”

They’re not going to fall for it, I thought. They’re not that stupid.

I gripped my sword tightly, wondering how many of the monsters I could take down before they killed me.

Then the demon leader hissed with laughter. His smile was even more disgusting than Barton the hippie river god’s.

“Satyrs, drink your fill,” he commanded. “Show this demigod that we control the fountain. Fill him with despair before we devour his flesh!”

“No!” I wailed. “Take my flesh, but never my refreshing fountain water!”

The pack advanced.

The satyrs lowered their faces to the water and slurped away.

*C’m on*, I urged silently, holding my breath. *Poof into oblivion!*  
*C’m on!*

Nothing happened. My heart sank. Our plan had failed.

The lead demon straightened and smacked his lips with satisfaction. “And now...”

His glowing red eyes went dark, and he collapsed in a heap.

*Thud. Thud. Thud.*

One by one, the rest of the pack fell to the pavement and lay still.

“Okay,” I muttered. “Not exactly what I was expecting.”

I leaped out of the fountain and splashed toward the nearest monster. He was snoring open-mouthed. And, just like Sam had warned, demon satyr breath smelled like week-old roadkill.

“Well done!” cried Columbia. She fluttered down from the treetop and set Sam on his feet. “You have vanquished the monsters!”

“But...” I realized what must’ve happened. “The water diluted the tea, making it less potent. That’s why it put them to sleep instead of vaporizing them.”

“That doesn’t matter!” Columbia said. “The satyrs are out like lights. I can take care of them from here.”

I bit back a comment, like *You’re a goddess. Why couldn’t you have taken care of them to begin with?* But I was starting to realize that gods and goddesses didn’t work that way. They would much rather watch heroes do all the work.

“C’mon, Sam,” I said. “We’ve got to get to the bridge!”

Columbia sighed with disappointment. “Leaving so soon?”

“Um, yeah,” Sam said. “Sorry, Goddess. Things to do, places to be. But thanks for, you know, saving me from being eaten. I owe you one. Bye!”

We jogged the entire two miles to the Congress Avenue Bridge. It was fully dark when we arrived. The crowds had dispersed along with the bats.

We crept down the slope of the riverbank. I didn’t see any signs of movement from underneath the bridge.

“Stay close,” I told Sam, brandishing my toothbrush.

Sam shook his head. “No. This is for you to do alone, Zane. Remember what Brykhon said? Only the next great hero can obtain this magic item. And only demigods can be heroes, not satyrs.”

I squeezed his arm. “You’re a hero to me, Sam. But all right, how about you be the lookout? We don’t want any random leftover demon satyrs sneaking up on us. And in case you need it...”

I gave Sam my toothbrush, which seemed to surprise him. Then, before I thought about it too much, I hurried under the bridge.



GO UNDER THE BRIDGE

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the next section may not make any sense to you.*

“I’ll fight them,” I blurted out, strangely calm.

Sam looked at me like I’d turned into a hippocampus. “*What? How?*”

“Well, I have my toothbrush...” I said, scanning the area for something else—anything else—I could use to fight a dozen eight-foot demon monsters. That was...ninety-six feet of monster, slowly clip-clopping toward us.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I leaped up and started walking, trying to get them away from Sam. He was my only friend. I couldn’t let him get turned into goat-meat tacos by a band of bridge-dwelling cannibals. The toothbrush felt heavy in my hand.

The demon satyr leader turned and snarled at me. His eyes narrowed. His nostrils flared. Behind him, the other monsters anxiously jostled one another.

I walked faster. I didn’t know if they liked the taste of demigod as much as satyr, but I wasn’t about to let them get close enough to find out.

“Hot out here, right, guys?” I said nervously. “Boy, am I thirsty.” They seemed to have lost all interest in the fountain.

I tried to force a whistle out of my shaking lips as I walked, but ended up settling for nervous humming.

*Clip-clop. Clip-clop.* All the demon satyrs were moving toward me now. I’d distracted them from Sam, but now what?

“I mean, that fountain looks really, really refreshing. If I were you, I’d stop and drink my fill...” I trailed off as the lead demon trotted toward me, picking up speed. His eyes flashed and he tilted his head back, emitting a long, gurgling howl.

The entire pack rushed me as one.

I raised the toothbrush and stroked the bristles with my thumb. It sprang into sword form, the bright blue gem gleaming on the hilt.

I swung it in front of me, driving the group back a bit. They bleated at one another and stopped, staring at me with what was clearly murderous rage. “That’s *right!*” I shouted, swinging the sword again. “Back off!”

They bleated a few more times, then began to spread out, slowly trapping me in a large semicircle, pushing me toward a graffiti-covered wall.

As my back hit the cold concrete, I swung the sword again, but the demon satyrs didn’t seem nearly as frightened this time.

“I think you chose wrong!” I heard Sam yell.

“Sam!” I shouted. “Run!”

“I can’t leave—I’m supposed to protect you!”

“Well, you’re not doing a very good job,” I said, looking above me for any possible way out.

The demon satyrs, working as a single unit, closed in.

I tried to stab one of them with my sword, but it leaped back, then quickly regained its place in the tightening circle.

A high-pitched squeal reverberated through the area, and it took me a moment to recognize it as a battle cry. Sam charged the group of demon satyrs, head lowered, nubby horns pointed at the nearest monster. The group bleated frantically at each other, and three split off, blocking Sam’s approach.

The closest demon satyr reached a gnarled claw out and grabbed the top of Sam’s lowered head, stopping him in his tracks.

“Gonna...get...you,” gasped Sam as his cloven hoofs churned aimlessly against the pavement. The other two demon satyrs flanked Sam and lifted him into the air.

“Sam!” I shouted, leaping to my right, trying to reach him. The other nine monsters closed in, trapping me against the wall, snarling and bleating, their eyes glowing.

I watched in helpless horror as Sam was carried away, his squeaking voice fading into the distance.

The remaining monsters tightened the circle, closer and closer...

I swung the sword as hard as I could, but the lead demon satyr reached out and slapped it from my hands. A gnarled hoof kicked it away.

Red eyes and sharp teeth filled my vision.

The last thing I remember hearing was the horrible bleating of the monsters...

*Zane...*

My head was killing me. I could sense light all around, doing its best to sneak in between my closed eyelids.

*Zane Carver...*

I mumbled something about letting me sleep longer, but a weird force was urgently pushing against my skin.

The voice came again. It was otherworldly, distant, magical. *I can only interfere so much with your quest. You must choose more wisely. You must begin to know yourself.*

I felt the force lifting me...

Then suddenly, my eyes slammed open and I was running. It was dusk. Sam was running to my right. I screamed and he stopped short.

“What? What?” he shouted.

“You’re alive!” I said, hugging him.

“So are you!”

“Yeah, but...where are we?”

Sam looked around. “This path leads down to the Congress Avenue Bridge. How did we get here?”

“You don’t know?”

He shook his head. “We were at the fountain, and now...we’re here.”

A shiver ran through my body and I looked up as a gentle breeze rustled the treetops. I stepped away from Sam. “Let’s just consider it a gift from the gods. Come on.”

Sam nodded, still unsure, but he let me drag him down the road toward the bridge. I mouthed a silent *thank you* as we ran on.

It was fully dark when we arrived. The crowds had dispersed along with the bats.

We crept down the slope of the riverbank. I didn’t see any signs of movement from underneath the bridge.

“Stay close,” I told Sam, making sure my toothbrush was back in my pocket.

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GO UNDER THE BRIDGE

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the next section may not make any sense to you.*

Word of advice: When searching for a magical item, it helps to know what you're looking for. I assumed it would be well hidden or disguised, so I wasted a lot of time poking through trash. And there was a *lot* of trash under that bridge. But about thirty feet in, directly under the center of the bridge, I saw it.

It was unmistakable. Enveloped by a glowing blue aura, it seemed to infuse everything around it with a thrumming energy. I glanced behind me to make sure I was alone, then approached. As I got closer, I was able to make out exactly what it was—a battered McDonald's Happy Meal box.

I shrugged. Nothing surprised me anymore. Maybe it was a box that provided unlimited food. Or a portal to another dimension. Or a super powerful grenade.

I stood above the glowing box, reached out a hand, then stopped.

*Only the next great hero can obtain it.*

What if that hero wasn't me? Would something bad happen if I touched it? What if I was an imposter after all?

From the riverbank, Sam called, "Uh, Zane, you might want to hurry. I think I just heard a bleat in the distance."

"Right. Here goes." I closed my eyes and grasped the box. I didn't dissolve into water or go up in smoke or get struck by lightning, which I figured was a good sign.

I opened my eyes and stared at the old Happy Meal box in my hands. I knew with absolute certainty that I was holding a clue to my godly parent's identity.

The trouble was, I had no idea *how* I knew that, or what the clue was. As I stood there examining it, the box began to slowly dissolve, its ratty edges floating away like mist. I squinted and, as the air cleared, I found myself clutching a small, plain, wooden ring.

"Zane," Sam yelled again. "Time to go. *Now!*"

I shoved the ring into my pocket and ran.

*Wait, my child.*

A voice echoed inside my head.

Everything around me seemed to freeze. The moonlight stopped rippling on the river. The rumble of cars ceased on the bridge above. Sam crouched mid-sprint as if he'd turned to bronze.

*You have succeeded in this task,* the voice intoned majestically, *as I knew you would.*



The voice sounded so watery and distant I couldn't even tell if it was male or female.

*You will know soon, the voice answered. But first you must travel to New Orleans. Hades requires your assistance.*

"H-Hades?" My heart seemed to be the only thing that wasn't frozen. It was racing at a million beats per second. "Isn't he—?"

*The god of the Underworld, yes. Get to New Orleans quickly or else...*

The voice hesitated.

"Or else what?" I asked. "What am I getting into?"

The voice cleared its throat as if embarrassed. When it spoke again, it didn't sound quite so majestic.

*Oh, it's nothing, really. Just...well...a small zombie apocalypse is looming, and you may be the only one who can stop it. Off you go!*

With that, the rumble of the cars returned. Moonlight rippled on the river. Sam sprinted toward me.

"Did you get it?" he asked.

"I did," I replied grimly. "And I got something else, too."

"Is it food?" he guessed. "Because I like food."

Despite all we'd been through, and all the danger we still had to face, I couldn't help but smile.

"How do you like beignets?" I asked. "We're going to the Big Easy."

# My Personal Zombie Apocalypse

“It’s going to explode!”

Sam’s cry jolted me awake. I jumped up and banged my head on the luggage rack. “Ow! *What’s* going to explode?”

“My hair.” He ran his hands over his horns—he’s a satyr: half-man, half-goat, all-around best friend—and through his shaggy blond locks. “When we hit New Orleans—boom!—the humidity will turn it into one giant frizz ball.”

I sank back down. “Dude, you’ve got issues.”

“Tell me about it.” He rolled his sweatshirt into a pillow and closed his eyes. “Maybe I’ll get a new hat...” Two seconds later, he was snoring.

Sam and I had boarded the New Orleans-bound train in Austin, Texas, the day before. We took turns sleeping and keeping a lookout for danger. Now it was my turn to stand watch.

Here’s something you might not know: keeping watch is boring. Being a demigod, I’m wired for action, not for twiddling my thumbs on a train hour after hour. After ten minutes, I headed to the dining car for a snack. I figured Sam would be okay for a little while. The train wasn’t very full, and if anyone was going to attack us, it probably would’ve happened by now.

The train slowed as I made my way to the dining car. The conductor announced we were heading over the Huey P. Long Bridge, one of the longest railroad spans in the United States. I looked out the window, expecting to see sky, bridge supports, and the Mississippi River. Instead, I saw a weathered face with hollow eyes and a slack jaw pressed against the outside of the window, peering in at me.

“Yikes!” I jerked back and stumbled into the booth across the aisle.

“Whoa! You okay there, bud?” the dining car attendant called.

“There’s someone right outside—”

The man chuckled. “You saw your reflection, is all.”

“Do I look like a middle-aged guy with a buzz cut wearing overalls?” I shot back. “Because that’s what I saw!”

The attendant perked up. “Overalls...Hey, you must have seen one of the ghosts!”

“*What?*”

“This bridge is supposedly haunted by workmen who were killed during construction. Rumor has it that a few were buried alive in the concrete pilings.” He shook his head. “You’re lucky. I’ve never seen one.”

“Yeah. Real lucky.” *And you’re crazy to want to see...that*, I added silently. I bought a sandwich and returned to my seat next to Sam.

He looked troubled when I told him what had happened. “Do me a favor,” he said. “Until we know what we’re up against in New Orleans, don’t go anywhere without me. If you’re already attracting ghosts—”

“Let me guess,” I cut in. “It’ll be even worse when we get there.”

Sam nodded solemnly.

Of course it will. Story of my new life.

“What’d I tell you? Boom! Frizz ball!”

Outside the New Orleans train station, Sam tried in vain to flatten his hair (while I tried in vain to keep a straight face).

Suddenly, he froze, nostrils flaring. “Dude, we gotta go. *Now.*”

When you’re a demigod and your satyr protector tells you to go, you go. Hesitate, and a monster or three could jump you. (Don’t laugh. It’s happened. More than once.)

We zigzagged our way through the historic French Quarter to Bourbon Street, one of the city’s tourist hotspots. Rock, funk, and the sound New Orleans is famous for—jazz—rang out from open doorways. We passed souvenir shops and art galleries. The spicy smells of Cajun and Creole cooking wafted out of restaurants. We finally stopped at a bustling open-air eatery with green-and-white striped awnings. CAFÉ DU MONDE, the sign said.

I leaned forward, trying to catch my breath. “What was after us?”

Sam shot me a puzzled look. “Nothing was after us. I was after some beignets.”

“We ran all this way for a *snack?*”

“Not just any snack.”

“I should have left you in Austin,” I grumbled as we sat down.

Sam snorted. “Like you could survive without me.”

“Like you wouldn’t cry your eyes out if I wasn’t around.”

“Like you wouldn’t starve on your own.”

Sam flagged down a passing server. Within minutes she delivered two plates of warm deep-fried dough dusted liberally with powdered sugar. He took a huge bite, plate and all, and sighed blissfully. “Try one.”

I did (minus the plate)—and my heart stopped, but not because it was clogged by sugary fried goodness.

A man at a far table was staring at me. His eyes were pools of liquid darkness. His inky-black hair brushed the shoulders of his suit, which seemed to swirl with shadows. A little freaked out, I hunched over my plate and focused on my food.

A deep voice said, “Welcome to New Orleans.”

My head snapped up and my jaw dropped. The man was now sitting at our table.

“Psst.” Sam handed me a napkin. He shot a nervous look at our surprise guest, like I was embarrassing him in front of company. “You’re dripping ABC beignet.”

“ABC?” I repeated stupidly.

“Already Been Chewed,” the man supplied. His voice made me think of oil—slick, thick, and potentially dangerous. He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “Go ahead and finish. I’ll wait.”

I realized who he was. In Austin, someone had spoken inside my mind (not a form of communication I recommend, by the way) and told me that the god of the Underworld needed my help. I wiped my chin and swallowed.

“You’re H-Hades.”

The man inclined his head in acknowledgment. “Your parent informed me you’d arrive today.”

“My parent? You know who that is?”

“Naturally. And I’ll tell you...once you’ve completed your task.”

*My task.* The voice in Austin had mentioned that, too. Something about—

“Zombies,” Hades said, “are infesting this town. Your task is to eradicate them.”

Sam gave a nervous bleat.

“Um, excuse me, Lord Hades,” I ventured. “But aren’t dead people *your* territory?”

“Zombies are *undead*,” he said tightly. “Bodies who have lost their souls but still manage to roam around. Lost to my world unless destroyed by a demigod’s hand. Lost to your world unless the monster that created them is defeated.”

“Why do zombies bother you so much?” I had to ask.

Hades grimaced. “They’re walking corpses. They give death a bad name. The Underworld doesn’t need that kind of negative publicity.”

“I thought all publicity was good publicity,” Sam observed. Then he observed Hades’s narrowed eyes and zipped his lip.

“We had a gifted demigod, Marie, stationed here for a while, but she passed away recently, so...”

“Who?” I asked, wincing as Sam kicked me under the table.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Hades, obviously growing frustrated. “The point is that a particularly troublesome demon has taken up residence in the area and is creating a massive zombie army. We need a demigod to neutralize him, so the souls can return to their bodies.”

“Wait,” I said, glancing at Sam and moving my legs to the side. “If the souls return, does that mean the zombies turn back into people?”

Hades nodded. “Yes. Alternatively, you could kill all the zombies—that would make them fully dead.”

“That’s right,” said Sam, as if he knew *anything* about the walking dead.

“But that wouldn’t eliminate the *root* of the problem. You need to neutralize the monster. Now, about that,” Hades said, all business, clearly hoping to prevent any more questions, “he has proven to be, err, challenging. In fact, five previous demigods have failed.”

I frowned. “Hang on. I was your sixth choice?”

Sam coughed. “Shouldn’t you be more worried about the other demigods than about whether you were sixth in line?”

“Oh. Good point. About the others...”

“They’re zombies,” Hades said. “The Mormo bit them.”

“The what-who bit them?”

“The Mormo. A rogue spirit. He can summon lesser demons, raise the dead, and turn a human into a zombie with a single bite.”

I flashed back to the ghost outside the train. I asked Hades if the Mormo might have raised that guy from the dead.

The lord of the Underworld shrugged. “Even before the Mormo arrived, New Orleans had ghosts. Other creatures, too, like werewolves, or *loups-garoux*, as they’re known here.”

He stopped when he saw my expression. “But never fear. The Oracle has indicated that you will succeed.”

I wondered if this Oracle had “indicated” success for the other demigods, too. “What do we need to do to defeat the Mormo?”

“What do *you* need to do,” Hades corrected. “*You* are the hero. Sam is just a lowly satyr. ”

Sam flushed and hung his head.

Anger rose inside of me. I didn't care how powerful Hades was—*nobody* dissed my friend like that. “Lowly? Sam's the bravest guy I know. I wouldn't be here if not for him! So tell *us*, what do we need to do to defeat the Mormo?”

Purple flames of fury flared in Hades's eyes, then subsided. “You capture him inside a magical *pithos*.”

“A *pithos*?”

“A large Greek storage jar with a lid. Once the Mormo is inside, seal it so he cannot escape,” Hades said. “There's just one catch: he must enter it willingly. You should also know that the Mormo has summoned the *daimones keramikoi*.”

“That's two catches.”

Hades pinched the bridge of his nose as if warding off a headache, so I turned to Sam. “What are the ‘demons karaoke’?”

“The *daimones keramikoi* are five evil spirits—the Shatterer, the Smasher, the Charrer, the Destroyer, and the Crudebake. In ancient times, they destroyed kilns and pottery.”

I put two and two together. “That means the Mormo knows about the *pithos*. He must have summoned the pottery demons to smash it.”

“Most likely,” Hades affirmed. “I don't know where the Mormo is hiding or why he has targeted New Orleans. But I do know this: fail, and the infestation of undead will spread far beyond this city.” He examined his fingernails. “A zombie apocalypse would *not* be good for my reputation. Prevent it from happening.”

I closed my eyes, chilled by the image of the undead taking over the world. When I opened them, Hades had vanished, but he'd left behind an envelope. I thought it might contain further instructions, but inside I found a gold coin and a note that said: 8:00 P.M. SHOW—PRESERVATION HALL.

“I guess the god of the dead is into jazz. Who knew?” I said to Sam as I pocketed the coin and note.

Sam was toying with the remains of my napkin, which was weird. Usually he ate stuff like that. “Sam? Did you hear me?”

“Yeah.” He finally looked up. “Thanks for sticking up for me.”

“Hey, you'd do the same for me.”

“Still, it was Hades and all. The guy whose favorite pastime is inventing eternal tortures for sinners. In my book, he's the scariest of all the gods.” He got to his hooves. “You really have become a hero, you know.”

“Well,” I replied, both pleased and embarrassed, “if I’m all that, then how come I don’t know where to look for this Mormo dude?”

“A demon that deals in death? Three guesses.”

I groaned. “A cemetery.”

“Got it in one, hero.”

New Orleans was built on a swamp. Know what happens when you bury something in a swamp? It doesn’t stay buried for long. For that reason, the Crescent City’s deceased were entombed above ground in mausoleums laid out in rows, like streets. According to the tourist brochure we snagged at an information kiosk, the greater New Orleans area had forty-two of these “Cities of the Dead.”

“The Mormo could be in any of them,” Sam lamented. “Where do we start?”

“By asking him.” I pointed to a mule-drawn carriage, one of many for hire in the French Quarter. The mule wore a straw hat decorated with pink flowers and regarded Sam and me balefully. “You speak mule, right?”

“Of course! I’m a satyr of many talents. I can dance.” He krumped some moves. “I can sing.” He belted out a few bars of “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

“Stop behaving like a donkey and go talk to that mule.”

I couldn’t hear the conversation, but when Sam returned, he looked grim. And he had the mule’s hat.

“Mike says weird stuff has been happening at night in Saint Louis Cemetery Number One. Strange sounds, triple the number of ghost sightings, fresh footprints...”

“That’s got to be where the Mormo is. I say we check out the cemetery now, while it’s still light, and then go back tonight to do some ghost wrestling. In between, maybe we can take in some jazz. And Sam?” I gestured to the hat in his hand. “What’s that for?”

“Duh. To cover my frizz. Look: nub holes.” He poked his fingers into the two slits cut for the mule’s ears and then jammed the hat on his head.

I cracked up. “Honey, those flowers are so *you*.”

Sam preened. “Pink is my color.”

I knocked him lightly with my shoulder. “You’re satyr-rific, Sam.”

He tipped the hat over one eye. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

Saint Louis Cemetery Number One was within easy walking distance of Café du Monde. It was a popular historical attraction, and we arrived just as a tour group was setting out. We trailed behind them to a white tomb with a gently peaked roof. Candle stubs, wilted flowers, strings of colorful beads, and other random objects littered the ground around it. Trios of hand-drawn X's marked the sides and front.

"This is tomb three hundred and forty-seven," the tour guide droned. "It is believed to be the final resting place of Marie Laveau, a renowned healer and pacifist. You may know her better as the Voodoo Queen."

A few people gasped. I nudged Sam. "Marie! Do you think she's the demigod Hades talked about?"

Sam raised his hand. "When did she die?"

"Uh," said the tour guide, sneaking a look at the tomb. "She died in 1881."

"That doesn't seem very recent," I whispered.

"In god years, that's like yesterday," Sam whispered back.

Someone asked about the X's on the tomb. "Ah, yes," the guide replied. "Before we go any farther, I must request that you not deface this or any of the vaults. But to answer your question: some people believe that if they mark this tomb with three X's and leave an offering, Marie will grant them a wish."

When the group moved on, I held Sam back. "I want to make a wish."

"Why?"

"Five demigods turned into zombies? We need all the help we can get."

Sam shifted his hooves uneasily. "I don't know. Voodoo is serious magic, and Marie Laveau was the most powerful practitioner of her time. Maybe of *all* time. What if something goes wrong?"

"She was a demigod. And the tour guide said she was a healer. Maybe she just needs a little coaxing to heal the people who were bitten by the Mormo." I knelt in front of her tomb.

Sam was quiet for a moment and then took off his new hat. "Okay. Want to offer her this?"

"Maybe just the flowers."

Sam gathered them into a bouquet, which I put with the other offerings. With apologetic thoughts to the tour guide, I made three tiny X's with a piece of brick, covered them with my hand, and whispered my request. When I removed my hand, the X's had disappeared.

"Whoa," I breathed. "You think that means she's going to grant it?"



“Either that or your sweaty palm erased the mark,” Sam replied. “So, what was your wish, exactly?”

“World peace, a hundred more wishes, and that you’d lose the hat.”

“Fine,” Sam grumbled. “Don’t tell me.”

“Come on,” I chided. “You know the deal with wishes. Tell them and they won’t come true.” I surveyed the cemetery and shivered despite the heat. “And we definitely want this one to come true.”

We had a pretty good feel for the cemetery’s layout by the time it closed to the public at three. I suggested we head to Preservation Hall and get our tickets early. Between the crowds of tipsy tourists and the Sisyphean task of pulling Sam away from open restaurants, it took us nearly forty-five minutes to get there. Sam wiped jambalaya off his chin and burped as I approached the closed ticket window. I knocked until a small, wiry man slid it open and squinted at us.

“Yeah?” he said, after a moment.

“I need two tickets for the eight o’clock show,” I said.

“Tonight,” burped Sam.

“Office opens at six,” he said, and started to slide the window shut.

“Please!” I said, and produced the gold coin that Hades had given us.

The man examined it for a moment, then shook his head. “US currency only. Thirty-five dollars apiece for Big Shot seats. Come back later.” The window clicked shut.

I turned to Sam. “How much money do we have left?”

He scuffed one hoof on the ground. “Uh, well...”

“Sam?” He reached into his backpack without meeting my eyes.

“Sam.”

He removed a handful of crumpled one-dollar bills and passed them to me. “New Orleans food isn’t cheap.”

“You spent *all* our money?”

He nodded woefully.

“How are we supposed to get into the show tonight? Hades obviously wanted us to go for a reason....”

Simultaneously, both of us looked over at a trio of break dancers who were drawing an enormous crowd across the street. “Maybe...” said Sam.

“Seventy dollars?” I said.

“Yeah! We have almost four hours. I can sing and dance. What can you do?”

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the next section may not make any sense to you.*

I racked my brain, trying to come up with something. I was sure that if I tried to sing or dance, we would end up *owing* money. Finally, I remembered that one of my uncles had taught me a really good trick.

“Magic!” I said.

Sam half-groaned. “The four of clubs trick?” he said.

“Well, it tricked *you*,” I said a little defensively. “I just need a deck of cards.”

We walked toward Jackson Square. The main park area, surrounded by a wrought-iron fence, was enormous and perfectly landscaped. A gothic-looking cathedral towered over everything, just behind a green-tinged statue of Andrew Jackson (he waved his hat at us). The stretch of sidewalk to the left of the main square was littered with small folding tables where psychics and tarot card readers sat. Artists had leaned their paintings against the fence to attract passersby. Sam looked around, then pointed to an empty spot next to some brightly painted canvases. “I’ll be over there,” he said. “If anything goes wrong, or the cops come, I’ll sing, um, ‘When the Saints Go Marching In.’ That’ll be our time-to-go cue.”

“Okay,” I said. “Good luck.”

Sam clopped off as I scanned the area and spotted an old man sitting behind a table covered by a multi-colored cloth. A chalkboard leaning against it read: TAROT CARD READINGS—15 DOLLARS. Three stacks of cards sat in front of him. I looked around for another option, then ran over.

“Excuse me, sir?” I asked. “I was wondering if you have an extra deck of cards I could borrow, just for a little while? I need it for a magic trick.”

“These aren’t your usual playing cards, son,” the man said, staring at me intently. “They reveal truth.” He indicated the empty chair across from him. “Why don’t you sit down so I can show you?”

“Well, um, I’m kind of short on time,” I said, resisting the urge to flee. “But maybe you have some you aren’t using right now?” I tried to peer inconspicuously into a canvas bag of supplies next to his chair.

The man’s gaze never wavered from my face. It felt like he was trying to read me like one of his cards.

“Look, I’m not a hustler, okay?” I continued. “I’m just trying to raise a little cash for an emergency. I promise I’ll give the cards back.” Then I added, “I’ll even give you a tip.”

The man started shuffling the deck in front of him, slowly and deliberately. I squirmed, thinking of the valuable time I was losing.

“Tell you what,” he drawled. “We’ll let the cards decide.” He divided the deck into three new stacks and placed them facedown on the table. “Choose one.”

“Uh, I don’t have enough money for—”

The old man waved his hand. “This is on me. Go ahead, pick.”

I don’t know why my fingers were shaking when I pointed to the pile on the right. He lifted the top card, turned it over, and laid it in front of me.

“Ah, the Fool,” he announced.

My face flushed. Obviously, this was some kind of joke he liked to—

“The Fool is the spark that sets everything in motion,” the old man continued. “The first step in the journey.” When he looked up at me, his expression was completely serious. “You are at the beginning of your enlightenment.”

I was so surprised I didn’t know what to say or do. I felt like...well, a fool.

The man leaned over, reached into his bag, and handed me a deck of cards. “Who am I to stand in your way?”

“Oh, thank you, sir!” Then I really pushed my luck. “Could I also borrow some chalk?”

“You must do what you must do,” the man said, which I took as a yes.

I grabbed a piece of blue chalk and picked up a discarded piece of cardboard nearby.

I quickly thumbed through the deck, scanning for the perfect card. There it was. I moved it to the bottom of the deck. Then I wrote THE MAGICIAN in big letters on the cardboard, placed the chalk back on the man’s table with a wave of gratitude, and walked a few yards away.

I put the cardboard sign face down on the asphalt and started shouting, “Step right up for a magic trick! Only one dollar!”

Tourist after tourist walked by, doing their best to pretend I didn’t exist. Finally, a young boy spotted me and tugged on his mother’s arm, whispering something to her. She sighed and gave him a dollar, which he then walked over and gave to me.

“What’s your name?” I said.

“Byron,” said the boy very seriously.

“All right, Byron,” I said. “Thank you so much for stopping. Are you ready for a great magic trick?”

The boy nodded, looking around in anticipation. I moved my chosen card to the center of the deck and shoved my pinky in just above it to

mark its place. "Okay," I said. "All you have to do is say stop whenever you like, all right?"

Byron nodded, his face screwed up in concentration. A cowlick erupted from the top of his head like a feather.

"Okay. Ready? Go!" I started flipping through the cards quickly.

"Stop!" said Byron.

I pulled off all the cards on top of my pinky and shoved the bottom of the deck toward him. "There you go," I said. "Take the card you stopped on and look at it, but don't show me."

Byron did as he was told, carefully covering it with both hands. I showed him the rest of the cards to prove they were all different. Byron's mother came a little closer, curious.

"What card did you stop on?" I asked him.

"Can I show it to you now?" asked Byron.

"You don't have to," I said, pointing to the cardboard lying on the ground. "My magic cardboard will tell us both the answer. Turn it over!"

I stepped back as Byron reached down and flipped the cardboard. He gasped at the words and showed me his card: The Magician.

"The magic cardboard never lies!" I said.

Byron and his mother clapped, then his mother pulled him away.

It had worked!

I flipped the cardboard face down again and put the Magician card back on the bottom of the deck, ready for my next victim.

Sam tap danced and sang his satyr heart out, while I lured in tourist after tourist, sending as many as I could over to the elderly tarot reader as a thank you for letting me borrow the cards.

Hours flew by. Finally, I heard Sam singing "When the Saints Go Marching In," and I gathered up the stack of dollar bills I'd managed to collect.

I ran over to him and realized how insanely sweaty he'd gotten. "It's...time...to...go..." he panted, picking up his hat full of crumbled bills and loose change. "Did...we...do...it?"

We walked over to a nearby wall and started counting our money. "...seventy-six, seventy-seven, seventy-eight, seventy-nine...Sam, we did it! We made eighty dollars!" I shouted, then hugged him, immediately regretting it as his wet goat scent clung to me.

"We...only...have...five...minutes..." he gasped. "Let's...go."

I laughed and shoved all but five of the bills into my pockets, then gave the tarot reader his cards back...along with that tip I'd promised.

[GO TO PRESERVATION HALL](#)

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I racked my brain, trying to come up with something. I was sure that if I tried to sing or dance, we would end up *owing* money. I thought back to all of the street performers I'd seen over the years: break dancers, magicians, guitarists, jugglers, mimes...I stopped suddenly, remembering a man I'd seen earlier that day. He'd been standing immobile on the corner, painted completely silver, a bucket sitting in front of him. Whenever someone put a dollar into his bucket, he would move like a robot and wave. That was all he'd done, and his bucket had been nearly full.

"I can stand still," I said.

"Huh?" said Sam.

"I can stand still like a statue," I said. "And when someone gives me a dollar, I'll wave to them."

"Why would someone pay for that?" asked Sam.

"Why would someone pay to hear you sing Katy Perry?" I asked.

He thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Fair point," he said, leading the way down to Jackson Square.

The main park area, surrounded by a wrought-iron fence, was enormous and perfectly landscaped. A gothic-looking cathedral towered over everything, just behind a green-tinged statue of Andrew Jackson (he waved his hat at us). The stretch of sidewalk to the left of the main square was littered with small folding tables where psychics and tarot card readers sat. Artists had leaned their paintings against the fence to attract passersby. Sam looked around, then pointed to an empty spot along the fence next to some brightly painted canvases. "I'll be over there," he said. "If anything goes wrong, or the cops come, I'll sing, um, 'When the Saints Go Marching In.' That'll be our time-to-go cue."

"Okay," I said. "Good luck."

"You need it more than I do," he said, then he took off his hat and gave it to me.

As he clopped over to the fence, I scanned the area and spotted an old plastic crate. I dragged it over to a small opening a few yards away, set the hat in front of it, and stepped up. I wasn't sure what position to stand in, but I figured it had to be something that people would notice, so I stuck both hands in the air like I'd just scored a touchdown and waited.

A few tourists walked past and stared at me strangely, then kept walking. I wasn't sure if they knew I'd move when they gave me money, but I didn't know how to tell them. I realized I didn't have a sign or body paint, so I probably just looked like a confused teenager.

I put my arms down and shook them out, my body already covered with a thin sheen of sweat. Standing still was *much* harder than I thought it would be. I stepped off my crate and walked around a little bit, stretching out my muscles. I needed a way to alert people that I was standing still for a purpose. I spotted an old man sitting at a card table with a handwritten sign that said TAROT CARD READINGS: 15 DOLLARS, and I walked over to him.

“Excuse me, sir?” I started. “I was wondering if I could borrow your marker? I’ll give it right back.”

“You sure you don’t want a readin’ instead?” he drawled, pointing to the empty chair in front of him.

I spread out my hands. “Sorry, dude. I’m all outta cash at the moment.”

He sighed and said, “We working people has to help each other out” as he handed me a red marker. I picked up a small piece of cardboard off the street, and wrote a huge “\$1” on it, and returned the marker with my thanks.

I placed the makeshift sign in front of my crate. Then, just to make sure the message was clear, I put one of my precious few dollars into the hat. Everyone knows that it takes money to make money.

I climbed back on top and extended one arm and one finger, pointing toward the Mississippi levee. I waited, trying hard not to move anything, not even my eyes. A few people stopped to read my sign, but then they kept moving. Finally, a blond man in a too-big T-shirt stumbled over and said, “One dollar. For what?”

He looked at me for an answer, but I didn’t move. He shrugged, reached into his wallet and removed a dollar, then placed it into the hat. Doing my best to move like a robot, I tilted my head and waved, then settled into a superhero pose, both hands on my hips.

The man stared, waiting for something else to happen. After about fifteen seconds, he said, “That was *terrible!*” and stumbled off down the street.

It hadn’t been great, but I’d made my first dollar. And the man hadn’t taken it back.

For the next three and a half hours, tourists came and went, a few dropping a dollar into my hat out of curiosity, nearly all of them leaving disappointed. Finally, I heard Sam singing “When the Saints Go Marching In” at the top of his lungs. I leaped down from the crate, wincing as my frozen muscles screamed in protest. I picked up the hat,

wincing even harder at the sight of thirteen lonely dollar bills and a handful of pity change.

I ran over to find Sam, realizing how insanely sweaty he'd gotten. "It's...time...to...go..." he panted. "Did...we...do...it?"

I shrugged, embarrassed. "I dunno," I said. "I didn't do so well." I started counting, putting each dollar into the hat.

"...sixty-nine, seventy, seventy-one." I looked at Sam, his hair a huge frizzy halo. "We're four dollars short," I said.

"Oh...man," said Sam, wiping his forehead. "We gotta *dance*!" He took a deep breath and started flailing wildly. He glanced at me, and I did my best to mirror him. I felt ridiculous, but five minutes later, we had four dollars in change sitting in Sam's new hat.

He smiled at me. "We...did it! Let's...*go*."

[GO TO PRESERVATION HALL](#)

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the next section may not make any sense to you.*

I racked my brain, trying to come up with something I could do. I was sure that if I tried to sing or dance, we would end up *owing* money. I thought back to all of the street performers I'd seen over the years: break dancers, magicians, guitarists, mimes...none of which was something I could do. "Maybe I could juggle?" I said.

Sam wrinkled his nose like he smelled sewage. "Can you do it without dropping the balls?"

"I don't know," I said. "I've never tried. How hard can it be?"

"Um, hard," said Sam.

"Well, maybe people will appreciate the effort," I said. "I honestly don't know what else I could do."

Sam cocked his head and looked at me curiously for a moment. "You know what?" he said. "It's worth a try." He led us down to Jackson Square. The main park area, surrounded by a wrought-iron fence, was enormous and perfectly landscaped. A gothic-looking cathedral towered over everything, just behind a green-tinged statue of Andrew Jackson (he waved his hat at us). The stretch of sidewalk to the left of the main square was littered with small folding tables where psychics and tarot card readers sat. Artists had leaned paintings against the fence to attract passersby. Sam looked around, then pointed to an empty spot near some brightly painted canvases. "I'll be over there," he said. "If anything goes wrong, or the cops come, I'll sing, um, 'When the Saints Go Marching In.' That'll be our time-to-go cue."

"Okay," I said. "Good luck."

"You need it more than I do," he said, then he took off his new hat and gave it to me. As he clopped over, I tucked the hat under my arm and looked around for something to juggle. About halfway down the block, I saw a man selling fruit from a cart: apples, melons, limes, coconuts. I used the rest of the change in my pocket to buy three limes (apples and melons seemed too big) and hefted them as I walked to the corner.

I placed the hat and one of the limes on the ground in front of me, then tossed one of the fruits into the air and caught it. Easy. I did that a few times, then I did it with two, tossing them gently from hand to hand. It felt strangely simple, like the limes were almost moving in slow motion. Maybe this demigod thing was good for something....

I picked up the third lime and started slowly. Toss one piece of fruit from the right hand into the air, then the lime from the left, then the third lime from the right hand while catching the second. Rinse. Repeat. I

dropped the fruit a few times, but then I managed to get through one rotation without dropping.

Then two.

Soon, I was keeping it going for ten or twenty seconds at a time... then longer.

“Juggling!” I shouted, unable to keep the smile off my face. “Come and get your juggling!”

A kid in a stained Cirque du Soleil shirt walked up and watched me for a few seconds until I dropped one of the limes. He picked it up and handed it back to me, so I started again. I juggled and juggled and he started clapping. A few other people stopped to check me out, and I said, “Money helps!” They laughed and put some change into my hat.

I got into the zone, getting better and better as the minutes flew by. Each lime seemed to hover in the air, allowing me more than enough time to grab it. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that bills were piling up in my hat. By the time I heard Sam singing “When the Saints Go Marching In” at the top of his lungs, it was literally overflowing with money.

I gave the limes to a couple of gaping kids, scooped up all the cash, and ran over to Sam. He was insanely sweaty. “It’s...time...to...go...” he panted. “Did...we...do...it?”

I started counting, putting each dollar into the hat. “...eighty-four... eighty-five...eighty-six...eighty-seven! Sam, we killed it! We made eighty-seven dollars!” I shouted, then hugged him, immediately regretting it as his wet goat scent clung to me.

“Come...on,” he gasped. “We...only...have...fifteen...minutes....”

I laughed and shoved all of the bills into my pockets. “If this demigod gig doesn’t work out, maybe we can take our show on the road.”

[GO TO PRESERVATION HALL](#)



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We sprinted over to Preservation Hall and purchased two tickets with minutes to spare. The place was tiny, with bare wooden walls, dim lighting, and minimal seating. A large crowd was already packed in, and Sam and I made our way to the front of the room.

A lone musician, a woman with dark hair flowing down her back, was tapping out a rhythm on a tall conga drum. Her gray eyes locked with mine and she smiled. An electric current ran up my spine.

“Sam, you see that woman?”

The band filtered in just then, blocking our view of her. When the musicians moved aside, she was gone, but her drum remained. Except...

“Look!”

A fog seemed to lift from around the conga, revealing an earthenware container of roughly the same shape and size. The tuning lugs had morphed into two handles. A solid clay lid, not a thin drum skin, covered the top.

“The pithos! It was hidden by the Mist!” Sam said. “Should we grab it and go?”

We couldn’t claim it yet, because the band had started to play. I’d never listened to live jazz before and thought the music was amazing. The little boy sitting next to me had a different opinion. He clapped his hands over his ears and squeezed his eyes shut. The boy’s father caught my eye and shrugged. “Guess not everyone is a music lover.”

The band finished its set forty-five minutes later. I’d hoped to sneak on stage and get the pithos while the audience filed out. But the musicians lingered, chatting with a few fans.

“Now what?” Sam whispered.

“We try the direct approach.” I moved to the trumpet player, an older man who had been introduced as Lou Garoo. He had a patchy beard, bushy hair, and a long nose. “Excuse me, sir, but is that pith—er, conga for sale?”

“Nope.” Lou’s voice was deep and husky, almost a growl.

My heart sank as I searched my mind for ideas.

Then he said, “But could be I’d trade ya something for it.”

“Anything!”

He nodded at Sam. “I got a liking for your hat.”

“My hat?” Sam turned to me. “He wants my nub hat?”

“Sensible design, those slits,” Lou said. “Works for mules and other...creatures...who might need a little extra room up top. Next full

moon, a hat like that could fit me just right.” He grinned, and suddenly his face looked less human and more...canine. Like the Big Bad Wolf.

“Lou Garoo.” I gulped. *Loups-garoux*. “You’re a—a—”

“Friend. Let’s leave it at that.” He combed his fingers (with the longest fingernails I’d ever seen) through his hair. “So, we have a deal? Hat for pith—er, conga?”

“Deal.” Sam handed over his nub hat, we grabbed the pithos, and the two of us shot out of there before we became doggie treats.

On visit number two to Saint Louis Cemetery Number One—after hours this time—we crouched behind a tomb, the pithos between us. I had just unzipped my backpack to get my dual action toothbrush—it turned into a sword *and* prevented tooth decay—when I heard the sound of brick scraping against brick. I risked a peek. A shadowy form moved swiftly through the gloom and disappeared.

“Something’s out there,” I hissed.

“Where?”

“Behind you,” said a gravelly voice.

Sam and I whirled around.

A seven-foot-tall man leaned casually against a crypt. He was dressed in a tight-fitting pinstriped suit, purple vest, and white shirt. A top hat perched on his head and a smoking cigar dangled from his mouth. His face was painted to look like a skull. He wore sunglasses with one lens missing.

One thing was instantly obvious: no way was he going to fit into our pithos.

The Mormo’s lips peeled back in a ghastly grin.

“Look at its teeth,” Sam whimpered.

There were only four, two upper and two lower, shaped like snake fangs and oozing venom. “Let me guess,” he said, his voice raspy and low. “You want me to get into your little clay pot.”

“Uh, just for a second?” said Sam.

The Mormo cackled, apparently genuinely amused. “You demigods. Not only will I never, *ever* get into your silly pithos, I am *highly* doubtful that you’ll even get the chance to try and make me.”

I pulled out my toothbrush, flicked the bristles, and it transformed into a Celestial bronze sword. “No?” I said.

“Nope,” said the Mormo, and lazily snapped his fingers.

“Zane!” shouted Sam, and I spun around to find a horde of ghosts moving toward me. I’d forgotten the Mormo could summon them. Their leader, a thick-necked woman with a hatchet in one hand and a decapitated chicken in the other, flew at me. I doubted she could do much damage with the chicken. The hatchet, though? I didn’t wait to find out. I sliced my sword straight through her vaporous form. She vanished with a shriek and the stench of sulfur.

Sam yelled my name again. While I’d been playing chicken with the Chicken Lady, the other specters had closed in around him.

“Duck!” I cried.

He dropped just as I swung my blade in a swooping, neck-high arc. The ghosts winked out one after another.

“Man, that smells bad!” Sam waved his hand in front of his nose.

The Mormo strode into the clearing and slow-clapped sarcastically. “Well-played. Let’s see what else you can handle.”

I charged forward with my sword raised, piercing his leg to the bone. The Mormo howled. I thrust again—but this time, I hit nothing. A split second before I struck, he flickered from solid to gas.

“Huh. Nice trick.”

“If you like that, you’ll love this.” The Mormo snapped his fingers.

Several vaults burst open. Skeletal remains, some with meat still clinging to the bones, clattered out and assembled themselves into semi-humans. In the distance, I spotted more ghosts floating toward us.

Sam picked up a piece of wood and swung it in a large circle. We attacked together. The bone people we knocked apart stayed down, but more kept coming. “There’s too many of them!” Sam cried as we backed away, slicing and dicing for our lives. “Maybe we should run for it?”

A low rumble shook the graveyard, and Sam groaned as five enormous spirits materialized on our left. “More?” he bleated. But they were uninterested in us and advanced slowly on the pithos, which we’d left behind a few crypts over.

These demons’ legs were thick red-brown pillars of lumpy clay. Three held hammers; their faces were patchworks of pottery shards. Scorch marks covered the torso and face of the fourth, who clutched a blazing torch. The last, inexplicably, wore a chef’s hat on top of his misshapen head.

“Smash?” one of the hammer dudes queried.

“Destroy!” agreed the second.

“Shatter,” the third added.

“The Demons Karaoke,” Sam groaned. “Forgot about them.”

“We can’t let them destroy the pithos,” I said.

“No way we can take these guys,” said Sam in a high-pitched voice.

Somewhere nearby, I heard the Mormo cackle. Now I understood his confidence—we were facing five massive demons, a horde of weapon-wielding ghosts, and about forty slow-moving zombies.

*That’s it. We’re goners. It’s over.*

Sam looked at me, panicked, and dropped his stick. “You have to save us,” he said.

“Me? What do you think I’ve been trying to do?”

“No,” said Sam, frantically, “I mean you have to call on your parent to help us. You have to use your power!” The demons moved even closer. I could see their teeth, could hear the hissing of the zombies, could feel the wind from the ghosts.

“I don’t *have* any powers,” I said. “You’ve known me my whole life! I couldn’t even tie my shoes until last year!”

“You *do*,” insisted Sam. “Every demigod has some piece of their parent’s power. You just need to manifest it. Now listen carefully: Some gods derive their powers from *outside* of themselves—the earth, the wind, the waters—while other gods get their powers from their *insides*—their minds, their social skills, their feelings. Which one feels closer to you? ”

“But—”

“Now,” he said.

**Select a choice:**

[INTERNAL](#)

[EXTERNAL](#)

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“Inside,” I blurted.

Sam nodded, then took a step closer.

I stared at him. “What?”

He put both hands on my shoulders and rubbed gently. “Take a deep breath. Relax. Now go ahead.”

“Go ahead with what?”

“Manifest your power, call on your parent. I don’t know exactly how it works, I’m not a demigod, but it usually looks like a deep breath and then some sort of zen focused concentration stuff.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Zombies and ghosts were coming in droves now. I hadn’t seen this many brain-dead bullies since we started middle school. Sam just stared at me anxiously. The demons snuffled and moved even closer.

I inhaled and focused my energy inward, calling on my parent—whoever it was—to help, to give me power. I opened my eyes and looked around. All I saw was a frantic satyr and an army of the undead. I bit my lip and focused even harder, my knuckles turning white around the hilt of the sword...and then I felt it—something deep inside my chest, something that may have always been there.

The answer.

“Sam, what’s our main advantage over these guys?”

“Uh, we’re alive?” he said.

“No,” I said. “*Speed*. And we don’t need to kill them, right? All we’re trying to do is capture the Mormo.”

“Okay...” he said.

“So we split up and run to opposite sides of the cemetery. Half will follow me, half will follow you. We meet back in the middle in five minutes, and that’ll buy us enough time to get the Mormo into the pithos.”

“I don’t know if—”

“On three. One. Two. Three!” Before my lazy satyr friend could object, I sprinted to my right, easily weaving between the dimwitted zombies and the unfocused ghosts. I’d realized the obvious: the undead were only dangerous if you tried to fight them, or were standing still. We didn’t need to do either.

The enormous karaoke demons trudged in my direction as I ran toward the far side, darting in between towering mausoleums. The moon was full and bright, the zombies slow and doddering. I got to the fence at the edge of the property and turned around to see at least forty zombies



moving toward me, a good sixty-five yards away. The demons were even farther back, and the ghosts flitted about, confused. The Mormo was around here somewhere, but if he waited just a bit longer, we could confront him as two against one instead of two against a million.

Two solid minutes went by until the horde was almost on me, and then I jogged in a looping semicircle around them, back to the spot where I'd left Sam. About thirty seconds later, Sam trotted up, huffing and puffing.

I smiled and leaned against the nearest mausoleum. We were alone in the alley.

"Look!" said Sam. He pointed at the tomb I was leaning against. It was covered with chalk X's. "It's Marie's," Sam crowed, stopping abruptly as a mist began to ooze from the wall. I leaped back.

We watched in awe as the mist coalesced into the translucent form of a dark-skinned woman wearing a turban. She peered at us, then spoke with an indistinguishable lilting accent. "You requested my favor with the Mormo?"

"Yes. Yes!" I couldn't believe the X trick had actually worked. "Can you help us capture him?"

"I'm afraid all I can offer is my advice. For years I was able to keep the Mormo at bay, but he is relentless. The zombies and ghosts will keep coming, and eventually, you will be overwhelmed. Your only hope is to neutralize him."

"We have the pithos..." I offered.

"Ah, yes. But how are you going to get him inside it? For that, you need an object of power."

"A what?" I asked.

"An object of power," she repeated. "I tried many during my time on Earth, but none was strong enough to entrap the Mormo."

"They're back!" shouted Sam, pointing to two approaching skeletons.

"Wait, I just thought of something!" I reached into my pocket and removed the wooden ring we'd found under the bridge in Austin. I held it out to Marie Laveau.

The spirit smiled. "Ah, yes. That just might work." She began to fade into the above-ground tomb. "Good luck..."

"Hold on!" I called after her. "What do we—"

But she was gone.

"What does the ring do?" shouted Sam, as he kept his eyes on another half-animated corpse.

I stared at the ring. “I don’t know,” I said.

“Well, put it on!” shouted Sam, scanning the graveyard wildly as four more undead trundled toward us, their tattered clothes and clumps of skin dragging along the ground. “They’re almost here! Come on!”

We took cover behind a crumbling tomb cordoned off with yellow caution tape. Sam dropped a reassuring hand on my shoulder. I patted it and turned to give him a smile.

Sam stared at me in wide-eyed terror. Both of his hands covered his mouth. So whose hand was...? I looked down. My hand was on top of... a hand. No arm. Just a hand.

“Yaaah!” I hurled it from me and scrambled back.

“Mmmuhhhuuummm.” A zombie lay on top of the tomb. She rolled off, landed with a wet thud, and lurched to her feet. Red-rimmed eyes stared out of her bloated and bruised face. Her matted hair hung in filthy clumps. Her remaining hand clasped a sword...made of Celestial bronze.

I sucked in my breath. “It’s one of the demigods Hades told us about.”

She took a laborious step toward us and raised her weapon.

*Make them fully dead...* Hades’s words flashed through my mind. One thrust of my sword and I could free her from zombiedom and send her to the Underworld.

But I hesitated. Destroying monsters and vaporizing the ghosts of long dead people was one thing. Stabbing a fellow demigod, even a zombified one—

“I can’t do it.”

“Don’t have to.” Sam whipped the caution tape into a lasso, roped the zombie girl’s torso, and wrapped her up tighter than a mummy. As an afterthought, he tucked her severed hand into a fold in the tape. “That might come in handy later. Ba-dum chhh!” He mimed a rimshot.

“Hilarious. Where’d you learn to rope like that?”

“Knew a demigod rodeo cowboy. Long story. I’ll—Watch out!”

Sam pushed me out of the way and kicked one of his legs forward... right into the stomach of a boy zombie wielding a bow and arrows. I had to stop myself from cheering as Sam trussed him up with an orange plastic retaining fence.

“Two zombie demigods down, three to go.” He picked up the zombie girl’s fallen sword and began to stand guard. “Try the ring.”

PUT ON THE RING

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“Outside,” I blurted.

Sam nodded, then took a quick step backward.

I stared at him. “What?”

He gestured expansively with both hands. “Go ahead.”

“Go ahead with what?”

“Manifest your power, call on your parent. I don’t know exactly how it works, I’m not a demigod, but for external godly parents, it usually looks like a full exhale, a sharp inhale, and then focused concentration like you’re trying to shoot lasers out of your eyes or something.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Zombies and ghosts were coming in droves now. I hadn’t seen this many brain-dead bullies since we started middle school. Sam just stared at me anxiously. The demons snuffled and moved even closer.

I exhaled. Then I took a deep breath and focused all of my energy outward, calling on my parent—whoever it was—to help, to give me power. I reached out to the air and the earth, the waters, and then the sun, trying to connect myself to any of it. I opened my eyes and looked around. All I saw was a frantic satyr and an army of zombies.

I bit my lip and focused even harder, my knuckles turning white around the hilt of the sword.

Nothing.

*Wrong choice*, said a familiar voice.

“What?” I said.

“Huh?” said Sam. “I didn’t say anything. You need to *hurry*.”

*I warned you in Austin. You must begin to know yourself...* said the voice, deep inside my head.

I nodded and apologized silently, shifting my attention inward, to my very core...and then I felt it—something deep inside my chest, something that may have always been there.

The answer.

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PUT ON THE RING

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I swallowed once, hard, leaned my own sword against a nearby crypt, then slipped the ring onto my finger. I winced, ready for anything...

I felt dizzy and my stomach moved into my throat, as if I was descending too fast in an elevator. The landscape had changed—it was now unrecognizable—but my body didn't feel different. I tried to summon lightning bolts or stir raging floodwaters. I tried to call down the sun or raise crops from the muddy earth. Nothing. I looked to Sam in despair, and—

He was huge! A giant! I was only as tall as his shoe. The ring had shrunk me!

He was frantically searching for me. "Zane?" shouted Sam. "Come back!"

I pulled one of his shoelaces to get his attention. "I'm right—"

"Ahh!" he shouted, swinging the demigod's sword.

I ducked instinctively, even though the blade was nowhere near the ground. "Sam!" I screamed. It sounded like a squeak. "I'm right here!"

He looked around wildly, then raised the sword again. I finally remembered to yank the ring off my finger, and my personal elevator instantly brought me back to size. As I shook off the feeling of vertigo, Sam made a choking sound and fell backward. "You were gone!" he said.

"I didn't go anywhere..." I said. "Just down. I was tiny!"

"The incredible shrinking ring!" he said, mouth agape.

The Mormo's laughter echoed across the cemetery, and a fresh wave of skeletons and half-decomposed corpses sludged toward us. In the distance, I heard the enormous karaoke demons grunting and moving. I thought fast. "Marie said we had to use the ring to beat the Mormo."

"But how can being tiny convince him to go inside the pithos?" asked Sam.

"I don't know yet. But I feel like you should wear it. We might be able to surprise him if he can't see one of us," I said.

"You...trust me to do that?" asked Sam.

"Sam, you're as much of a hero as I am," I said. A slow, scraping sound filled the air and I shivered. "Okay," I said, handing him the ring. "Go."

Sam looked at me nervously and slipped the ring onto his finger, instantly disappearing. "Did I shrink?" came a small voice from below.

"Definitely," I said, looking down and being careful not to move my feet. "You're a cute little teeny tiny goat man."

“Shut up. I’m going to head left and see if he follows me,” said Sam, his voice growing increasingly faint as he moved away. “You can count on me!”

I needed a really, really good idea. What would the Mormo want? What could I promise him was inside the pithos?

The scraping sound grew louder, and I ducked down, laying the pithos on its side.

“Over here, fang face!” I heard Sam squeak. Fortunately, he still had a big mouth for such a little guy.

I saw the Mormo stop and turn. “Here’s what’s going to happen, demigod,” he called, both his teeth and his voice oozing venom. “Eventually, I’m going to catch your friend, and I’m going to kill him. Then I’m going to come back and kill you. You won’t leave, because you have to get me into that fragile little pithos...and I’m not ever, ever going to do that. And if I don’t get you...the zombies will.” He smiled a little wider, then set off in the direction of Sam’s voice.

“No!” I shouted, and took a few steps forward, but I couldn’t leave the pithos unattended. “Sam! Come back!”

When the only reply was the grunting of the undead, something inside me snapped, and I took off running after the Mormo. I wasn’t going to leave my best friend alone, not when he was the size of a mouse in a zombie-filled New Orleans graveyard with a deadly demon chasing after him. “Sam!” I called again. Then I started singing our code song. “*Oh when the Saints! Go marching in!*” It was my way of telling Sam that we needed to get out, that none of this was worth it, that I’d rather have my best friend alive than know who my godly parent was, or kill a bunch of zombies, or make Hades happy.

“*Oh when the Saints go marching in!*” I heard Sam’s voice answer and I followed it, looping around back toward the pithos. “*Oh I want to be in that number! Oh when the Saints go marching in!*”

I turned down a long aisle of mausoleums to see the Mormo narrowing in on an aisle. I sang even louder, hoping Sam would take the hint and get out. “*Oh when the Saints—*”

Now, I’m not the greatest singer, but I can carry a tune. So what the Mormo did next astonished me.

He covered his ears and squeezed his eyes shut, just like the little boy in Preservation Hall. Then he started keening as if in agony.

*Guess not everyone is a music lover.*

Music, I thought. Music is his weakness. It hurts him.

Jazzed by my revelation, I stopped in mid-song. That was a mistake. The Mormo sprinted toward me. “Sam, sing! Sing and try to get as close as you—”

From out of nowhere, Sam’s reedy voice picked up where I’d left off. “*Oh when the Saints go marching in.*”

The Mormo clamped his hands over his ears again and grimaced in pain. He snapped his fingers, sending a cluster of zombies my way, and another in the direction of Sam’s voice.

“Keep going!” I shouted to Sam. “I’ll get the pithos!”

“The ring is working! The zombies can’t figure out where I am!” Sam shouted back. “Wait, I’ve got an even better idea....”

I sprinted around the standing mausoleums, searching for the pyramid-shaped tomb where I’d left the pithos. Behind me, I heard the Mormo’s howling melt into Sam’s caterwauling.

“Keep it up!” I shouted as I spotted the pithos. I grabbed it and ran back to find the Mormo writhing in pain on the ground, while a horde of zombies knelt around him, seemingly searching for Sam. My satyr friend was still singing—he sounded very close now.

Then I spotted him—he was standing on the Mormo’s shoulder, singing right into his ear.

I started singing my heart out too as I laid the jar on its side and uncapped it.

“*When the Saints go marching in!*”

We finished the chorus and stopped singing.

The Mormo dropped his hands.

“You can’t bite both of us at the same time!” I yelled. “Whichever one of us you attack, the other will go all diva on you!”

“And I know Italian opera!” Sam added.

“Gahh!” The Mormo began to dissolve, and Sam jumped to the ground. If the Mormo vanished now, we were sunk....

I moved forward. “You can’t escape music!” I cried in desperation. “It’s everywhere!”

He solidified again. “Not if I destroy it where it reigns!” He stood and prowled back and forth like a caged lion. “Silencing New Orleans jazz is just the first step. Nashville, Memphis, Detroit, Seattle, Cleveland —”

“Country, blues, Motown, grunge,” said Sam from somewhere near my left shoe. “Wait. Cleveland?”

“Rock and Roll Hall of Fame,” I supplied.

“Ah.”

The pieces fell into place. “Zombies can’t sing or play instruments, can they? Not even the trom-*bone*—ba-dum chhh!”

Sam added a sliding note. “Wah-wah-*waaaaah*.”

“Silence!” the Mormo shrieked. “I must have silence!”

“That’s why you’re making zombies—to help you silence all music. Well, there’s only one place where you can get the peace and quiet you want.”

Right on cue, I heard Sam’s words echo from inside the pithos. “Yeah! In here!”

“Never!” The Mormo rushed me, fast as lightning.

“*Ninety-nine bottles of goat milk on the wall! Ninety-nine bottles of milk!*” Sam’s voice reverberated in the empty jar. “*You take one down —*”

“Gahhh!” The Mormo fell to his knees.

“—*and pass it around—*”

“He’s got ninety-eight verses to go. So what’s it going to be? Eternal peace within the pithos or the musical renderings of Sam the Satyr?” Making sure Sam was no longer inside, I righted the jar. “It’s your choice.”

“*Ninety-six bottles of—*”

The Mormo shape-shifted into gas. Like a genie returning to its bottle, he vanished into the pithos. I quickly slammed down the lid.

“—*one down, pass it around—*”

“Sam, you can stop now. We got him!”

“*Ninety-five—Oh.*” Sam broke off. “We got him?”

“We did, and guess what? It wouldn’t have happened without you, the so-called lowly satyr! Even Hades would have to admit that.”

“I couldn’t have been much lowlier, that’s for sure.” Sam suddenly grew back to normal size beside me. “Ah, that’s better. Here, take this. I’ve had enough of being a cemetery rat.” He passed me the ring. “Your plan worked.”

“It wasn’t an actual plan,” I said, smiling. We looked around as the zombies slowly blinked and straightened up, color rushing back into their gray skin. Hades had been right—freed of the Mormo’s curse, the spirits were returning to their rightful bodies.

Then, from behind the pyramid-shaped tomb, the five enormous karaoke demons shuffled out. “Oh *man*,” Sam whimpered. “I was just about to celebrate.”

“But we captured the Mormo!” I protested. “How come these guys didn’t poof away?”

“The Mormo summoned them, but he didn’t *create* them. They exist with or without him.”

Sam and I moved back to back, the jar between our feet, swords poised and ready. The *daimones keramikoi* shuffled forward, their legs making squishing sounds as they moved. And I heard other noises, too—scuffling, scraping, and whispers from behind the surrounding tombs.

“Sam, the *keramikoi* aren’t our only problem,” I hissed. “Something else out there is about to—”

“*Attack!*” A figure sprang out of the darkness, yelling at the top of his lungs. Four others raced to join him.

When I was a kid, I saw this corny Western movie where the cavalry rode in and saved the day. Now I was living that scene. Five dirty but very much alive demigods—one trailing yellow caution tape, another with an orange mesh vest—came out of nowhere and rushed to our aid. An arrow pierced the torch-wielding arm of the demon I assumed was Charrer. It dissipated with a bellow. A girl wearing thick leather gloves flung a razor-edged discus, slicing one of the hammer dudes in half. The three other demigods each picked off a *keramikoi*. Moments after the battle began, it was over.

The demigods strode toward us. Their clothes were in tatters and their hair had seen better days, but otherwise they seemed unharmed. I noted with relief that both of Caution Tape’s hands were in place. Grinning, she held the previously severed one out and said, “Put it there. I’m Tabitha.” When I hesitated, she added, “Don’t worry. It’s on nice and tight.”

Tabitha introduced us to the others. “Ming is the one rocking the discus. You’ve met Ely, with the bow and fancy new vest. The others are —”

Introductions were cut short when the ground rumbled and gave way near the pithos. A figure emerged from the hole and brushed dirt off his suit.

“Hades is in the house,” Sam muttered.

The lord of the dead casually toed the pithos into the hole. When I didn’t hear it hit earth, I guessed the hole tunneled all the way to the Underworld.

“Zane, walk with me.” Hades crooked his finger at Sam. “You, too.”

“Me?” Sam sounded surprised.

“You have proven yourself worthy of the gods’ gratitude, satyr. So what I am about to reveal concerns you as well.”

We strolled a short distance through the cemetery. “Tell me, demigod, have you figured out your parent’s identity?”

My heart hammered in my chest. “I—I have my suspicions.”

“And if your suspicions don’t match your hopes? Will you be disappointed?”

I lifted my chin. “I will be satisfied just knowing the truth.”

“And you, Sam Greenwood. Will you continue by this hero’s side regardless of ancestry?”

“Always,” Sam replied without hesitation.

“Very well.” Hades threw his arms open wide and cried, “The time has come to claim this demigod as your child!”

Nothing happened at first. Then a glowing white owl clutching a silver olive branch appeared above my head, spinning slowly.

“Wow,” I breathed as I stared at it. “Just...wow.” Sam gave an awed bleat.

The other five demigods joined us. They congratulated me, and Tabitha gave me a warm hug. “We took a vote, and it’s unanimous. If either of you ever need a hand”—she grinned and wiggled her fingers—“just holler and we’ll be there.”

“Friends for life,” Ely added. The others echoed their agreement.

“Relish this moment, demigod,” Hades advised. “You’ve earned it.”

“No.” I slung my arm around Sam’s shoulders. “We’ve earned it.”

Hades nodded solemnly and then stomped his foot once. The ground swallowed him up, leaving behind a fresh mound of dirt.

“Gotta love the dramatic exit,” Sam said. Then he looked past me. His eyes widened and he slipped out from under my arm. “Zane, you know how I vowed to stay by your side? Well, there’s one thing you need to do alone.”

“Huh?”

“Someone’s waiting for you.” Sam gently turned me around.

I blinked. Standing not twenty feet away was a statuesque woman with a light gray cloak wrapped around her shoulders. Thick black hair was tucked behind her ears, accentuating intense gray eyes and the angular peaks of her face.

“Zane,” she stretched both arms toward me. I recognized the voice as the one that had spoken inside my mind in Austin. “I’ve been looking forward to this moment for a long time.”

I moved toward her slowly, suddenly hesitant. “Why did you wait so long?” I asked.



Athena touched the side of my face tentatively. “I have looked for you.” Her voice caught. “But you were kept hidden from me. I...it is a story for another time. What is important is that you have a great future ahead of you, Zane, and I am proud to call you my son.”

“Well, you have two new children,” I said. “Sam is going with me everywhere from here on out.”

Sam nervously inched in our direction. “It’s okay if you don’t...”

Athena smiled benevolently and gestured Sam over. “You’ve shown incredible bravery, Sam Greenwood. I accept all the choices of my children, but this one I embrace—I believe it will be a wise choice indeed.”

I nodded at Sam as my mom wrapped the two of us in a warm hug. It felt like friendship and love—all rolled into one furry, goat-scented ball. It felt like I was home.

Then Athena winked out in a flash of light.

I turned to Sam and shrugged. He smiled and shrugged back.

“Think this means I’ll ace the SATs?” I asked, and Sam laughed.

An unfamiliar feeling of contentment settled over me as I took in the warm breeze, the distant sounds of jazz, and our five new demigod friends sprawled against a nearby crypt.

For the first time in my life, I felt like I belonged, and I was ready for whatever came next.

**THE END**

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